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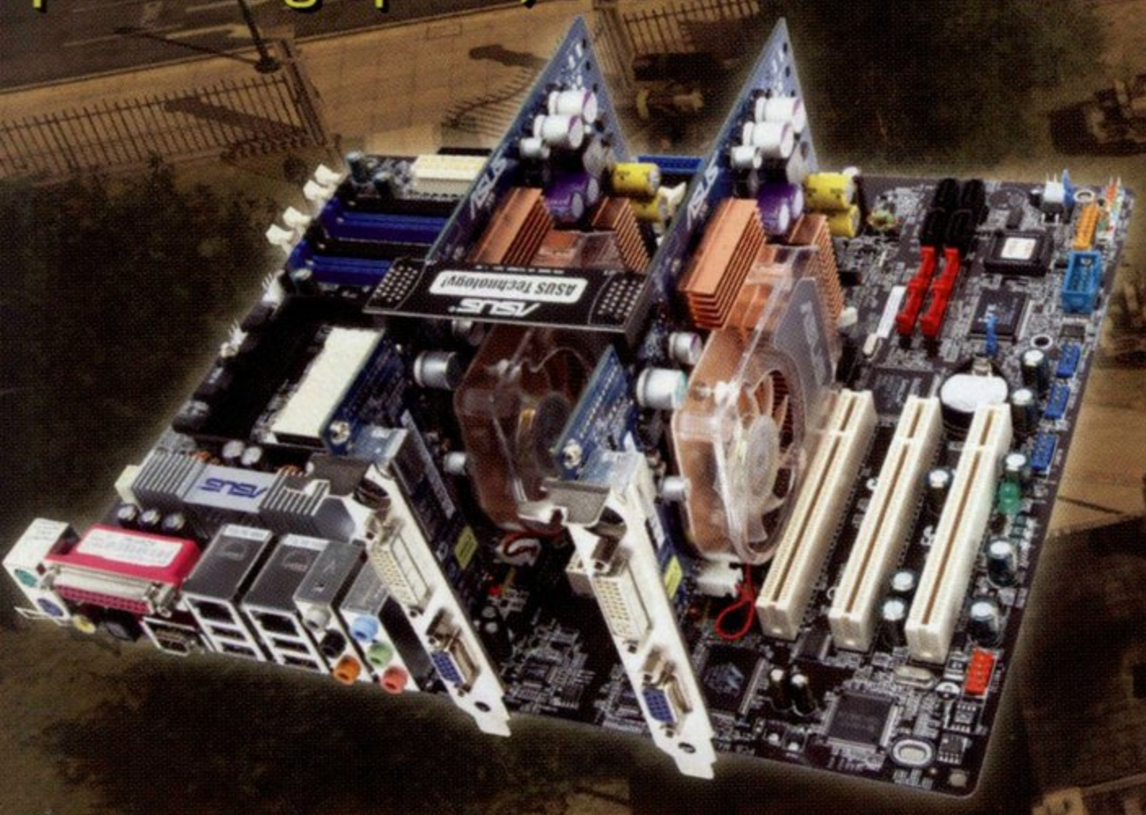

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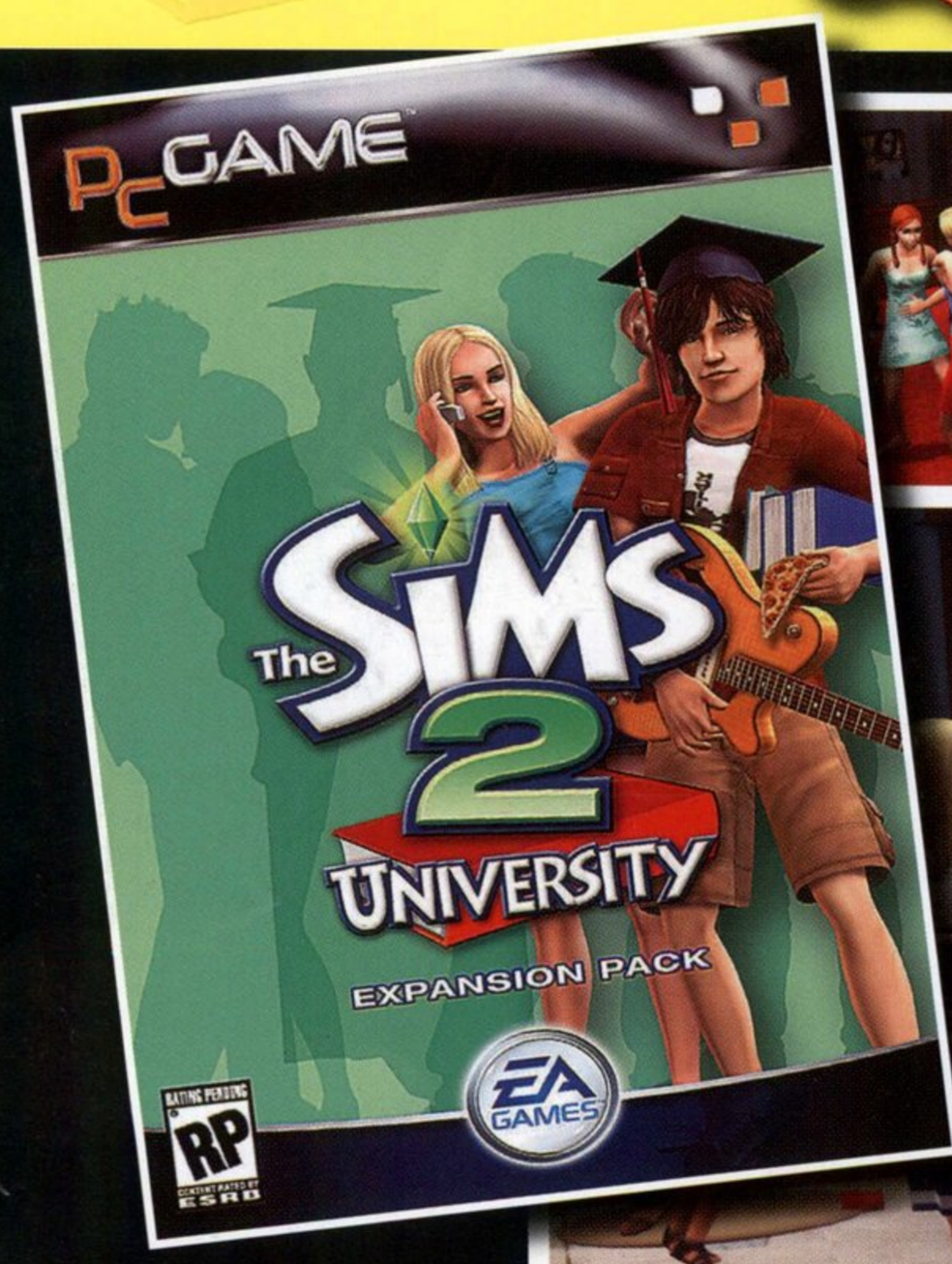
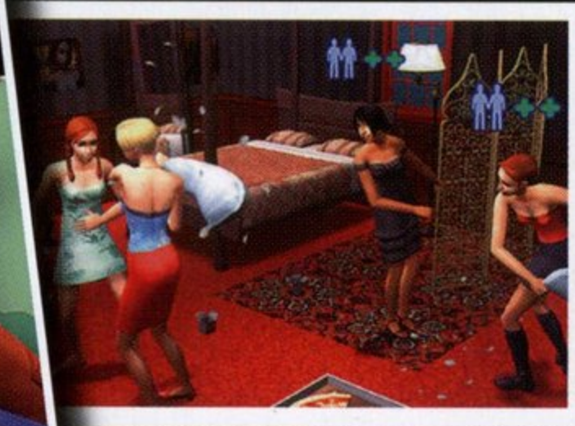
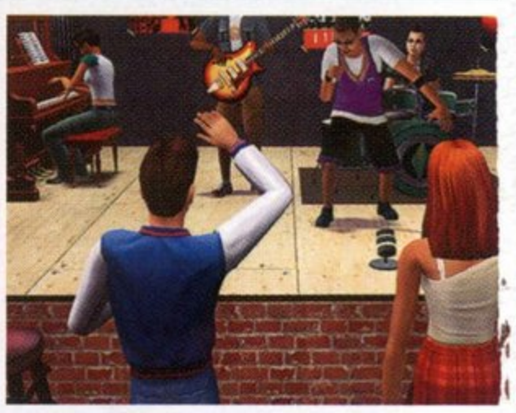
The SIMS 2 UNIVERSITY







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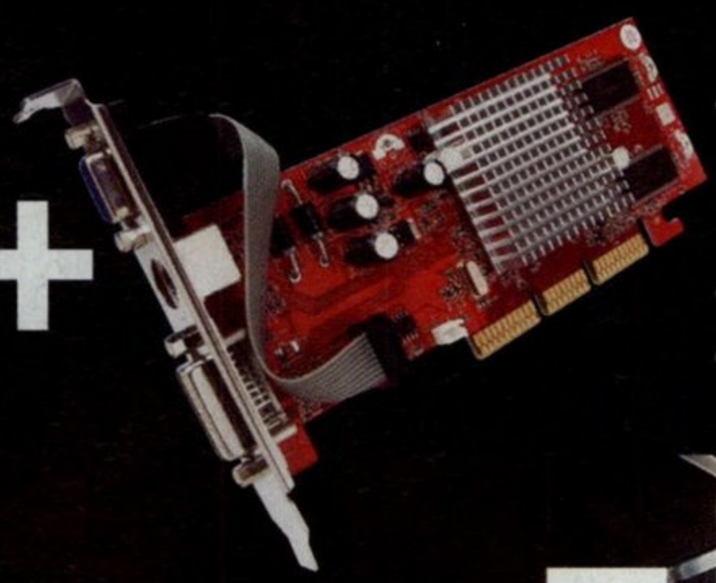

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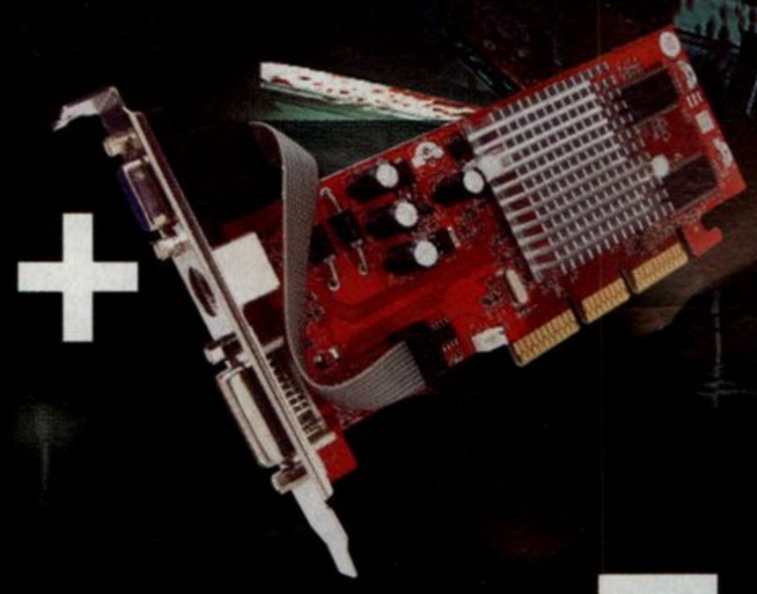

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Editor ..... Dan Toose
Managing Editor ..... Kevin Cheung
Associate Editor ..... Mark Donald
Associate Editor ..... Ross Atherton
Disc Editor ..... Dan Toose
Art Director ..... Paul Cook
Associate Art Editor ..... Mark Wynne
Designer ..... Amanda Neal
Hardware Editor ..... Asher Moses

CONTRIBUTORS & FRIENDS
Mark Sutherns, Michelle Starr, James Cottee, Tony Ellis, Eliot Fish, Kieron Gillen, John Hicks, Steven Willis, Tim Stone, John Walker, Richard Cobbett, Al Bickham, Jim Rossignol, James Carey, Michael Abolins, Iain McCafferty, Andy Lowe

PHOTOGRAPHY
Photography ..... Tim Levy
In-house images taken with the Nikon Coolpix 995, Nikon DX-1 and the odd snap with Dan's Canon G2 Powershot

PRODUCTION
Production Manager ..... Sue Wall

ADVERTISING
Advertising Manager ..... Sam Rochaix
sam@derwenthoward.com.au
Call: (02) 9386 4666

PUBLISHING
Publisher ..... Paul Hardy
Directors ..... Jim Flynn, Nathan Berkley
Creative Director ..... Simon Wan

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DERWENT HOWARD

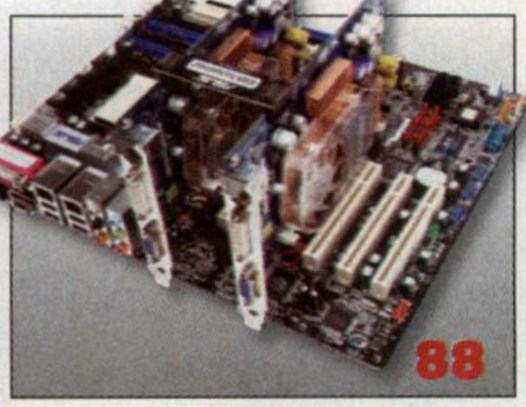
This month, we've been...

COLLECTING...
...the very best games of 2004 and an awesome Alienware PC to give to one of you. Honest!

PASSING TIME...
...the hardcore RTS way, namely, getting a fix of *Empire Earth 2*. Demo and preview this month!

RESPONDING TO AN...
COVER FEATURE ...*Act of War* upon the long serving *Command & Conquer* series. French developers Eugen have raised the bar, giving all of us a better World War III game to play!

TO THE DARK SIDE...
...As our resident sabre-slinger Eliot Fish passes his verdict on *KOTOR 2: The Sith Lords*.



SLI ABOUT IT...
...when it comes to video cards. Discover the good and the bad about nVidia's SLI solution.

A return to form?

Remember the days when games like *Empire Earth* and *Age of Empire* were landing? RTS was booming, and although last year we saw some great strategy titles like *Rome: Total War*, RTS games were hardly dominant in 2004.

Fear not fast thinkers, 2005 is already shaping up to be a real return to form for the whole genre. Not only are old favourites like the two aforementioned games getting sequels this year, we're also seeing new developers try their hand at taking on the established stalwarts of the genre - *Act of War* clearly tries to take on the *C&C* series, and does so with style. There's also developers taking on established hoodoo games, with *Empire at War* looking like it could well be the first Star Wars strategy game that doesn't suck.

So with all that in mind, it would appear that 2005 is clearly a return to form for RTS gaming, but can the same be said about other gaming genres? *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* set new standards in their own special ways, and *Far Cry* was a fantastic surprise for FPS gamers... But does anyone really expect the FPS games of 2005 to be even better?

Oh well, at least one thing that you can count on getting better is PC Games Addict. We've just given our new hardware editor Asher Moses a chance to introduce his section of the mag, where he talks about some of the changes he'll be bringing in over the coming months.

We've also given you a full free game in *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, a new kind of extra from PC Games Addict. For us, we never want a 'return to form', but rather to keep improving as a matter of course.

DAN TOOSE
EDITOR

Send letters
PC Games Addict, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

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Star Wars: Total War? Sort of...

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Big and beautiful: it's the RPG that puts the 'More' into Morrowind. Except the 'e'.

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Last issue we had our say on what the best games of 2004 were, and now it's your turn. A bit miffed you had to wait a month longer than us to cast your verdit? Don't be, we didn't stand the chance to win a copy of all of last year's best games, plus an awesome **Alienware PC**.

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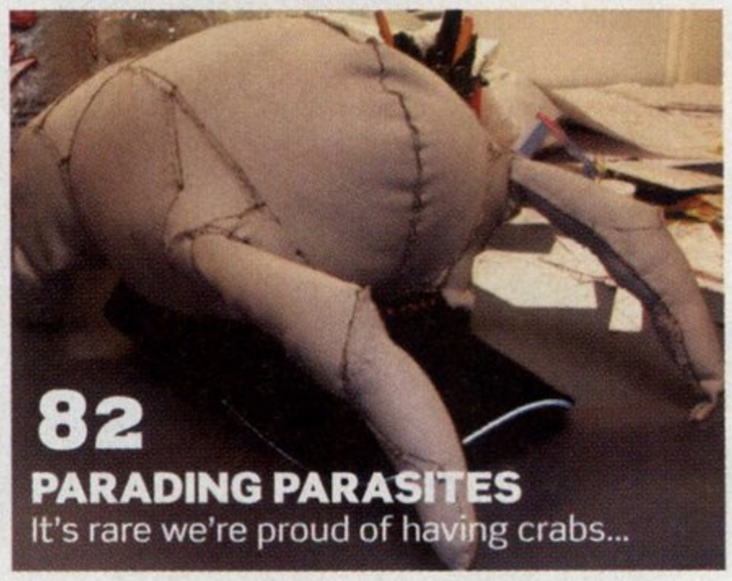

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One day we'll get this completely right...

ON THE DISC PCGA is more than just a magazine. Articles sporting this sign are enhanced by extras on the disc.

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April 2005

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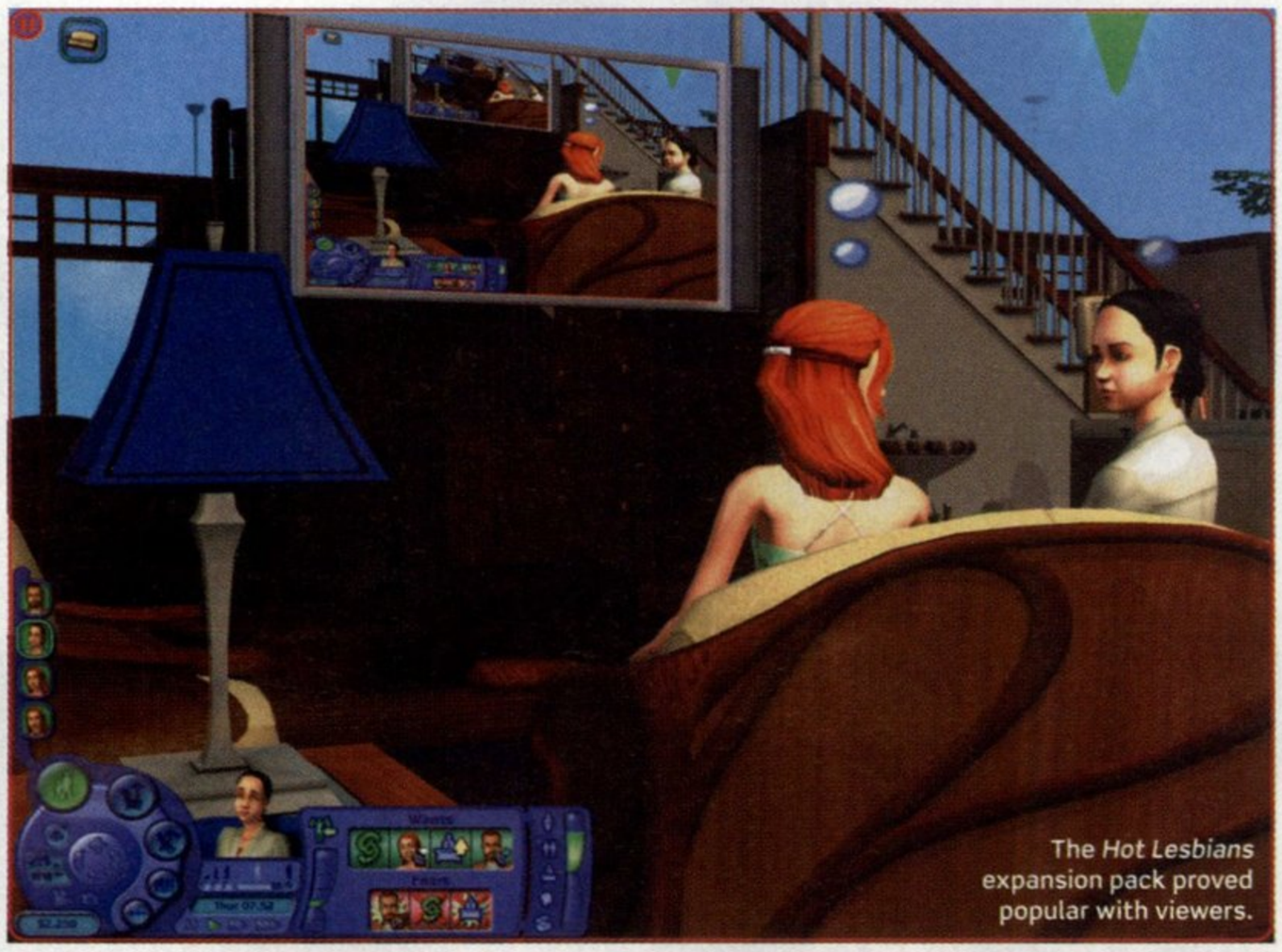
The *Hot Lesbians* expansion pack proved popular with viewers.

"Vote now for a) a crying fit b) a spanking or c) a slap in the face followed by a Salsa lesson with the maid." Stick in an ocker accent and it could be a twisted Big Brother variant, but if EA's plans come together that scenario won't be far off. The next big spin-off of *The Sims* could be their very own TV show.

It makes sense. *The Sims 2* was last year's biggest selling PC game; now EA is exploring options to bring their quirky suburban tale to TV. With the sort of oddball scenarios you get in *The Sims*, it could be anywhere from a sitcom to an X-Files-tinged tale of alien abduction and impregnation. But the most obvious idea has already been brought up by Jan Bolz, vice president of marketing and sales for EA Europe, and it puts the viewers directly in control of the show. "One idea could be that you're controlling a family, telling them when to go to the kitchen and when to go to the bedroom, and with this mechanism you have gamers all over the world 'playing the show,'" he says.

Imagine watching TV, deciding the fate of Sims at the touch of a button. Well, you and a consensus of other viewers, at least.

It's just one idea that EA is playing around with, but one that exploits precisely what people love about *The Sims*: the control. You could even have a premier episode where the viewers decide which characters they want to watch, what their house looks like, what clothes they wear and who they want to sleep with. The challenge will be in making a show that doesn't just appeal to the lowest common denominator. But then, even *Sims* creator Will Wright has confessed to us that he uses babies as draught excluders. Will we end up with a show where an unwashed man in his pants with a bladder problem uses a baby as a draught excluder? Or has Jasper Carrot already signed up that particular TV concept?

However it turns out, this is a big step for one of the PCs most popular titles. A mainstream window into the world that the PC made popular.

README

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SAY *WHAT*?

The month in tongues

NCSoft Memo
"[*City of Heroes*] allows young and old to exercise their imaginations to create super-powered beings and send them off to interact with the creations of other individuals in a virtual world called Paragon City. If it should be banned, then so should the #2 pencil, the Lego block, modelling clay, and anything else that allows one to give form to ideas..."
CoH *prepare their case against Marvel's lawsuit.*

Jack Emmert
"We've added about 450Mb of content. By update 4 we will have doubled the size of the original game."
More content = more fun. The amount of work that goes into a MMORPG is ably demonstrated by the CoH *lead designer.*

Revenge attack

Jilted lover deletes game character

A Japanese woman was arrested after wiping her ex-boyfriend's MMOG character, losing all his characters and items.

The jilted lover took revenge on the man after he ended their relationship, by wiping his *Lineage* account. He reported her to the local police who arrested her and charged her with illegally accessing his account. Her choice of revenge was particularly nasty, as they both met in-game.

Lineage is one of Asia's biggest MMORPGs, with millions of subscribers, so it's no surprise that the police took action. Yet we can't help but feel they were a little overzealous in their application of the law. A warning would do.

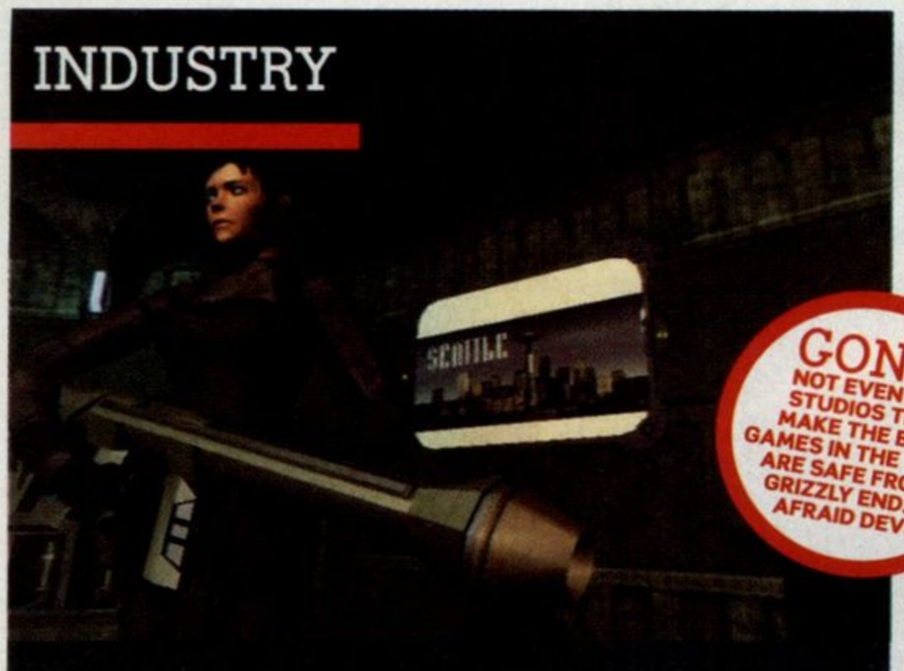
As an act of revenge on a dedicated gamer, we can't think of anything more damaging, although perhaps the man in question would have been better occupied putting time and effort into his relationship than into trying to find the balor orcs.

The rumours that our Ed Dan Toose now fears for the lifespan of his roving Night Elf hunter in *World of Warcraft* are completely founded...

gobbets

Lost Cause › The world's first Ultra-Massive MMORPG, *Wish*, was canned before it was even released this month. Developers Mutable Realms took the cancellation on their collective chin, and decided to make the best of it by auctioning their servers off on eBay. The asking price: US$120,000. The bids? Zero.

INDUSTRY



GONE! NOT EVEN THE STUDIOS THAT MAKE THE BEST GAMES IN THE WORLD ARE SAFE FROM A GRIZZLY END. BE AFRAID DEVS!

Ion Storm - R.I.P.

After the speculation surrounding staff departures, namely Harvey Smith and Warren Spector, from Ion Storm in the last year or so, Eidos has finally announced the official closure of the world famous Austin-based studio.

Ion Storm was founded in 1996 by John Romero and Tom Hall, but it wasn't long before the newly-hatched operation was bought out by Eidos. The following years were spent developing and hyping John Romero's brainchild, *Daikatana*. Which, as we all know, was quite a colossal disappointment when it was finally released in 2000, and ultimately resulted in Romero and Hall exeunt stage left. And the closure of the Dallas penthouse studio.

The same year, however, the Austin studio released, under the direction of Warren Spector, *Deus Ex*, the innovative thinking-gamer's FPS. It was shortly after this that the studio acquired the license for the Thief series, and the studio released *Deus Ex: Invisible War* in late 2003, and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* in mid-2004.

As with all relatively high-profile games, though, the two titles received a pretty mixed reception, and came under a bit of fire. When Spector and *Invisible War* executive producer Harvey Smith both jumped ship towards the end of last year, Ion Storm's future started to look rather grim, particularly when considered in the light of reports of Eidos' financial difficulties. The studio's denouement was officially announced on February 10, 2005.

Eidos have finally announced the official closure of the world famous Austin-based studio

While the closure of Ion Storm meant that 35 jobs were lost, Eidos have further announced that they are ramping up operations in their San Francisco studio, Crystal Dynamics, with 50 additional staff to be employed, in a bid to "consolidate and strengthen (Eidos') technical and management capabilities into a smaller number of studios which are capable of scaling up in order to meet the competitive challenges that lie ahead." It was not confirmed whether any of the positions available would be offered to ex-Ion Storm staff.

The sad thing for PC gamers is that Ion Storm brought us games that were industry benchmarks, and they'll be sorely missed.

No, it's not an 'All hell breaks loose' expansion for *CoTN*.

Seven Kingdoms: Conquest

The long awaited return of a RTS stalwart

It's been six long years since the last installment of the RTS series *Seven Kingdoms* hit our shelves. *Seven Kingdoms II: The Fryhtan Wars* was released in 1999, and while developer Enlight has been busy working on some pretty cool titles since then, *Seven Kingdoms* itself seemed to have fallen by the wayside.

That, however, is not so: the third title in the series, *Seven Kingdoms: Conquest* is currently in development, and Enlight have announced a US release date for September.

Conquest will return to the elements that made the original games stand out – espionage, trade, and diplomacy – on a new 3D engine, and spanning 6000 years, from ancient Egypt in 3000BC to a futuristic Earth in 3000AD, of warfare between human and demon factions.

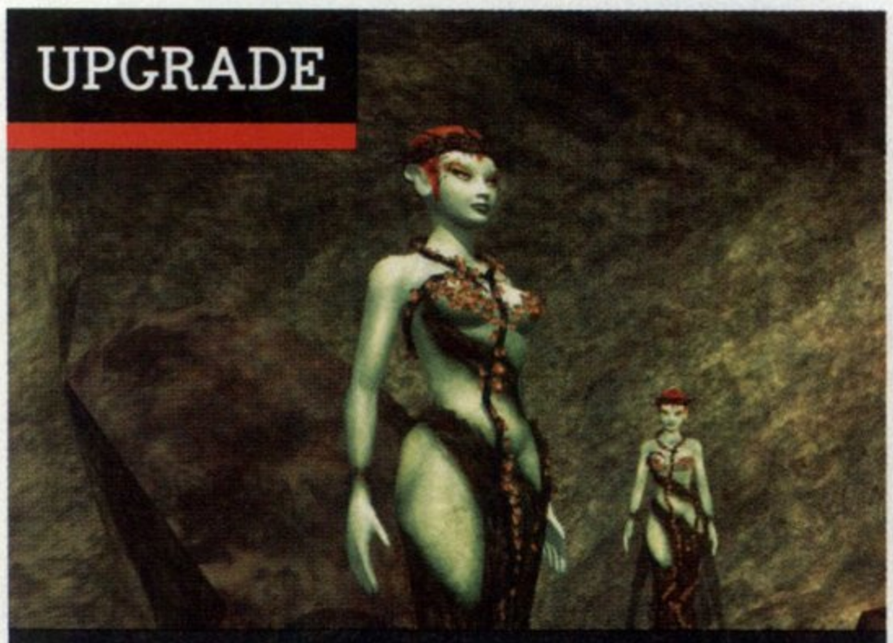
Players will be able to play one of seven human civilisations or seven demon races, and the game will be able to be set up for eight-player multiplayer via the net or LAN - But who's the eighth kingdom going to be then?

So far, it's sounding like a long overdue return to the frontlines of RTS, combining what we loved about the original game with a new gameplay engine that will do pretty decent justice to the *Seven Kingdoms* name.

gobbets

Learning can be fun ›Some clever erudites from the University of Leeds, UK students have developed a project known as CogVis, an AI that uses visual observation to learn from humans - enough to play "Rock, Paper, Scissors" against human opponents. Well, sure, it ain't up to bluffing a card shark in a game of poker, or trialing pick up lines, but it's a start.

UPGRADE



More to do in EQ2...

Competition on the MMORPG market is pretty fierce, and SOE are definitely doing their damnedest to keep their *EverQuest II* players coming back for more. They keep on tweaking the game, and throwing in new content at no additional cost to subscribers. Their latest upgrade, though, is a pretty big'n.

The first new feature to note is eight new instanced dungeons scattered over Norrath. This means the odds for boss encounters have increased, as well as new loot to be scored. New NPCs and quests have been thrown in for solo gamers and small groups.

Which gets to the crux of what players of *EQII* really want. Heretofore, the game has been particularly hard on the solo player, only offering the greatest rewards to those players who choose to play in a large group.

The most significant move to counter this problem lies in experience value changes, making leveling much less tedious - players will need to spend less time killing rats in sewers. The most experience to be had will still be from playing in a large group, but now the solo gamer won't suffer for not being gregarious.

The material rewards are more substantial too - for both kinds of play. Special items and rare drops that were previously only available to groups are now being made available to soloists, and for groups, there are also new items, and ultra-rare drops to be discovered.

It's a step in the right direction, recognising that either form of play is equally valid, and will make *EQII* a much more relaxed and satisfying place to be... And perhaps an option to *WoW*.

Live to see another Dawn of War

You've tried the best, now try the rest. That's Relic's message to loyal fans of *Dawn of War*. The RTS adaptation of the cult tabletop game has finally spawned its first official add-on: *Winter Assault*. The four existing sides are now joined by a fifth. The Imperial Guard are the foot-soldiers of the Human empire; mere sidekicks to the Marines in the first release, this cosmic rabble now have their turn in the spotlight.

These beleaguered starship troopers of the Imperium are getting a more rounded treatment, reflecting the variety of hardware and unit types you get when drawing conscripts from a million different planets.

To say that the Imperial Guard has potential for varied unit types is an understatement. They may lack the cybernetic implants and religious fervour of the Marines, but they compensate by getting all the best toys. In the tabletop game, the IG can field Star Wars style walkers, large tanks, and larger artillery pieces.

Numerous types of specialised soldiers can inspire their comrades, turning the tide of battle with magic and mechanical finesse. Amongst their ranks are Commisars, Preachers, "Adeptus Mechanicus Enginseers," and "Sanctioned Psykers."

What's more, the umbrella of the unimaginably vast 40k Universe ensures there's plenty of scope to simply make new stuff up. The screenshots we've seen thus far have a decided Siege of Stalingrad feel to them – we're guessing all that lovely snow will soon be churned up into multi-coloured slushies drawn from the blood of Man's myriad mortal enemies.

Foremost amongst the complaints of *Dawn of War* players has been the story – there simply wasn't enough of the good stuff. This add-on will give us more – and more of Tom Baker's superlative narration, if we're lucky.

Don't throw those multi-sided dice away just yet, though. Winter Assault is scheduled for release in the Spring, so Warhammer 40,00 fans could be inhaling paint fumes until as late as November.

GfK THE PC TOP 10 CHART

The MMORPG Myth...

MMORPGs weren't selling well here at all, in fact, in our reader survey it was the least popular genre of all games. Now, for months in a row, *World of Warcraft* has come out on top... Well, aside from the *Sims 2*, but that was going to be a given.

If the server load has been a bit much for Blizzard's online opus, then topping the charts may well compound the problem. Eeep!

World of Warcraft disproves the notion people don't want to play MMORPGs

POSITION	GAME	PUBLISHER
1 (1)	*The Sims 2*	EA
2 (4)	*World of Warcraft*	Vivendi
3 (3)	*Half-Life 2*	Vivendi
4 (2)	*The Sims Deluxe*	EA
5 (NE)	*Knights of the Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords*	EA
6 (6)	*LOTR: Battle for Middle-Earth*	EA
7 (RE)	*Counter-Strike: Condition Zero*	Vivendi
8 (5)	*The Sims: Unleashed*	EA
9 (7)	*The Sims: Superstar*	EA
10 (8)	*The Sims: Makin' Magic*	EA

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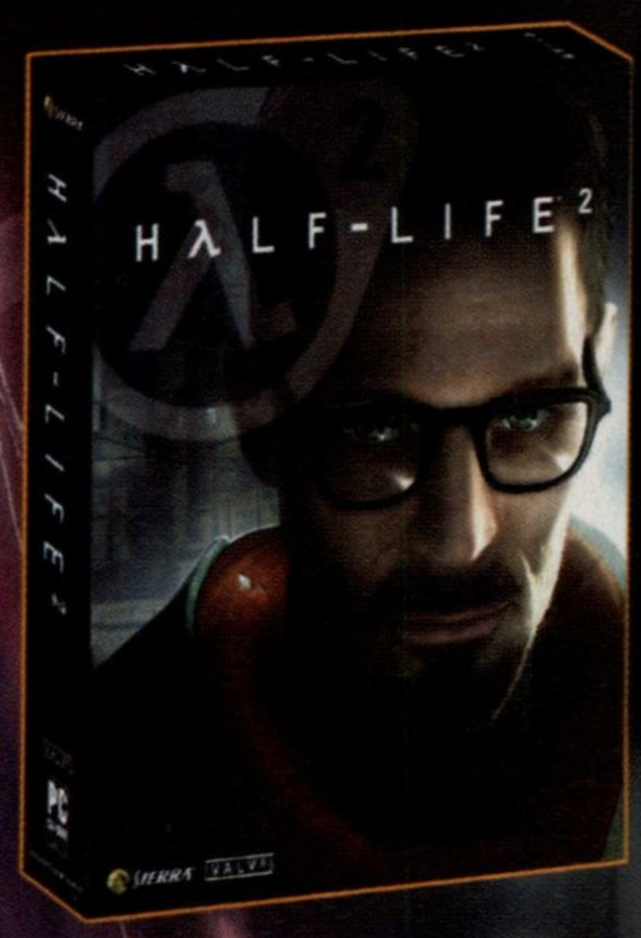


ati.com

Devil's Advocate

Only a small proportion of gamers are female. Why is this so?

JAMES COTTEE... has it on good authority that girls just wanna have fun. Perhaps a community service announcement from Cyndi Lauper could bring some semblance of gender equalisation to the games industry...

Video games aren't catering to women. The industry needs to get its act into gear, and fast, if it ever wants to embrace the other half of the human race. Games are sexist. Games are stupid. And on and on... we've heard these sentences and their endless permutations many, many times. They understandably spring from a cursory analysis of the facts: far more men than women play games. But the issue is not clear cut. Some women do play games, and not just because some oafish male forces them. They buy and play of their own volition, yet remain a smaller minority than, say, female M.P.s in parliament.'

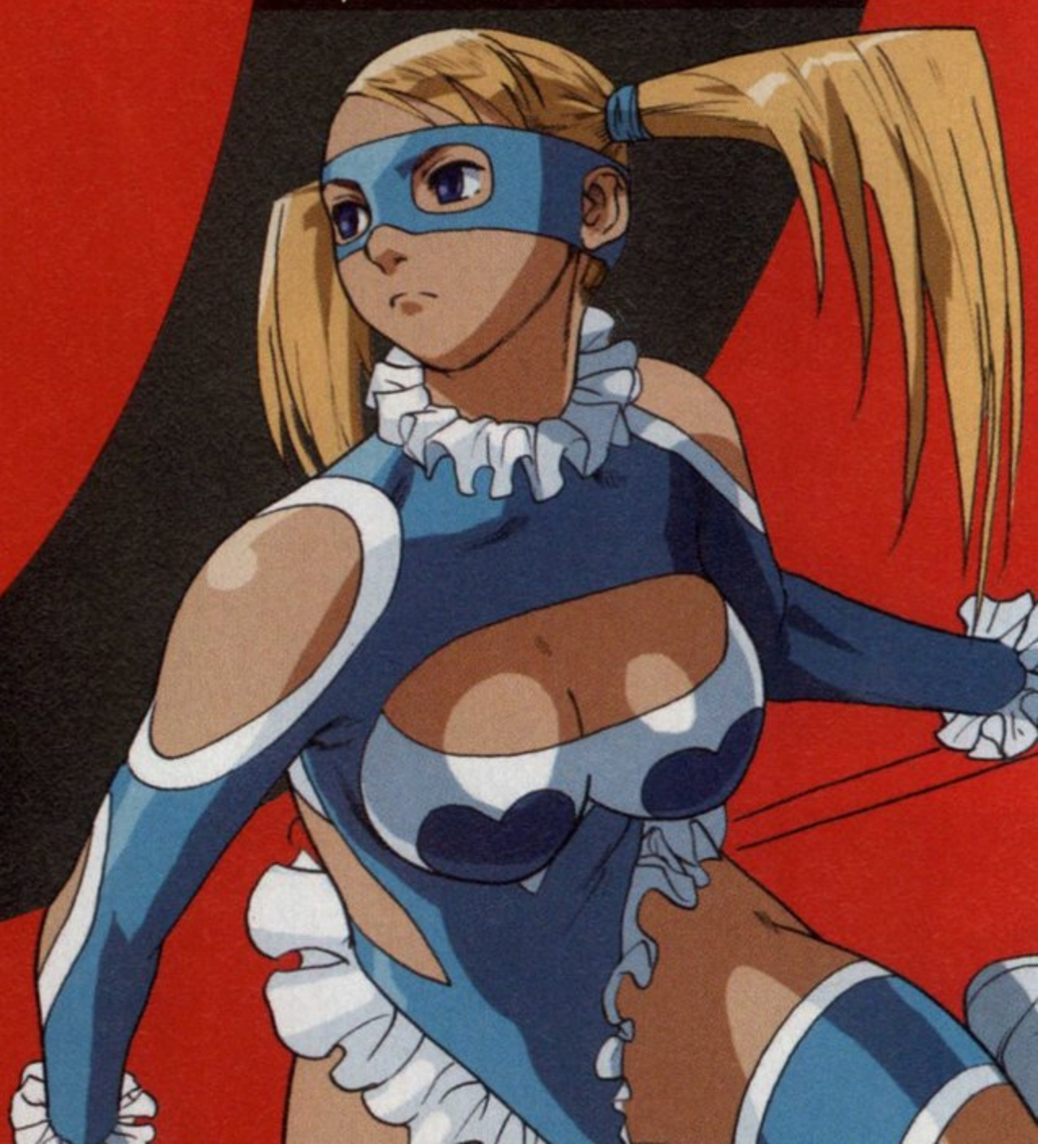
In our sterile, pre-packaged landscape, games are an inexpensive means of diversion, escape, and even socialisation. Our real achievements in these fake worlds fill our heads with memories of thrills and achievement. They're good, clean fun - so why are so many women missing out? Off the top of my head, I can identify two main fields with the most room for improvement. One is obvious, the other all too often overlooked.

Think of Lara Croft for a moment. Not her form - that perverse fusion of sharp-edged polygons and inflated bulges - but rather what she meant to the gaming community. A leap forward in 3D game design when first released, *Tomb Raider 1* also had plot and characterisation that drew the gamer in, regardless of their sex. Then the rot set in, as a raft of tepid sequels served to stagnate both the genre and the market.

It is a politically correct fantasy to suggest that someone must be able to directly identify with the character they control on screen (Mario's appeal was not unique to fat, Italian-American plumbers). It is a commercial reality that bad games are repellant to all gamers. Badly handled sexual stereotypes are just one of the many way to ruin a game. It's usually just the tip of the low-quality iceberg, albeit the part emblazoned on the front of the box. If these cyber-tramps dominate the shelves, who could blame Ms X for making her first visit to a gaming emporium her last?

So, most games are not only bad, they're offensively bad. But what about the good ones, games where sex is handled with some degree of deportment? Girls and women can enjoy playing games as diverse as *Civ III*, *Silent Hill* and *PokeMon* - if they give them a chance. Thus the other great failure of the industry is marketing - the self-perpetuating misconception that gaming is somehow the exclusive domain of drooling lads and trouser-wearing tomboys.

Are there any game reviews in Cleo, or Dolly? I'm afraid to look, but I'd hazard to guess that their coverage is minimal. If a young woman gets into gaming, it's not by going with the flow, but by going against it. There is a stigma at work here, and it stems from not only the games industry's youth, but its diversity. Movies are easily pigeon-holed: action, horror, romance, comedy. A game might have all of the above, without the creeping genre exclusion that affects, say, "chick flicks." Games are not movies - at their best, they're much, much more.



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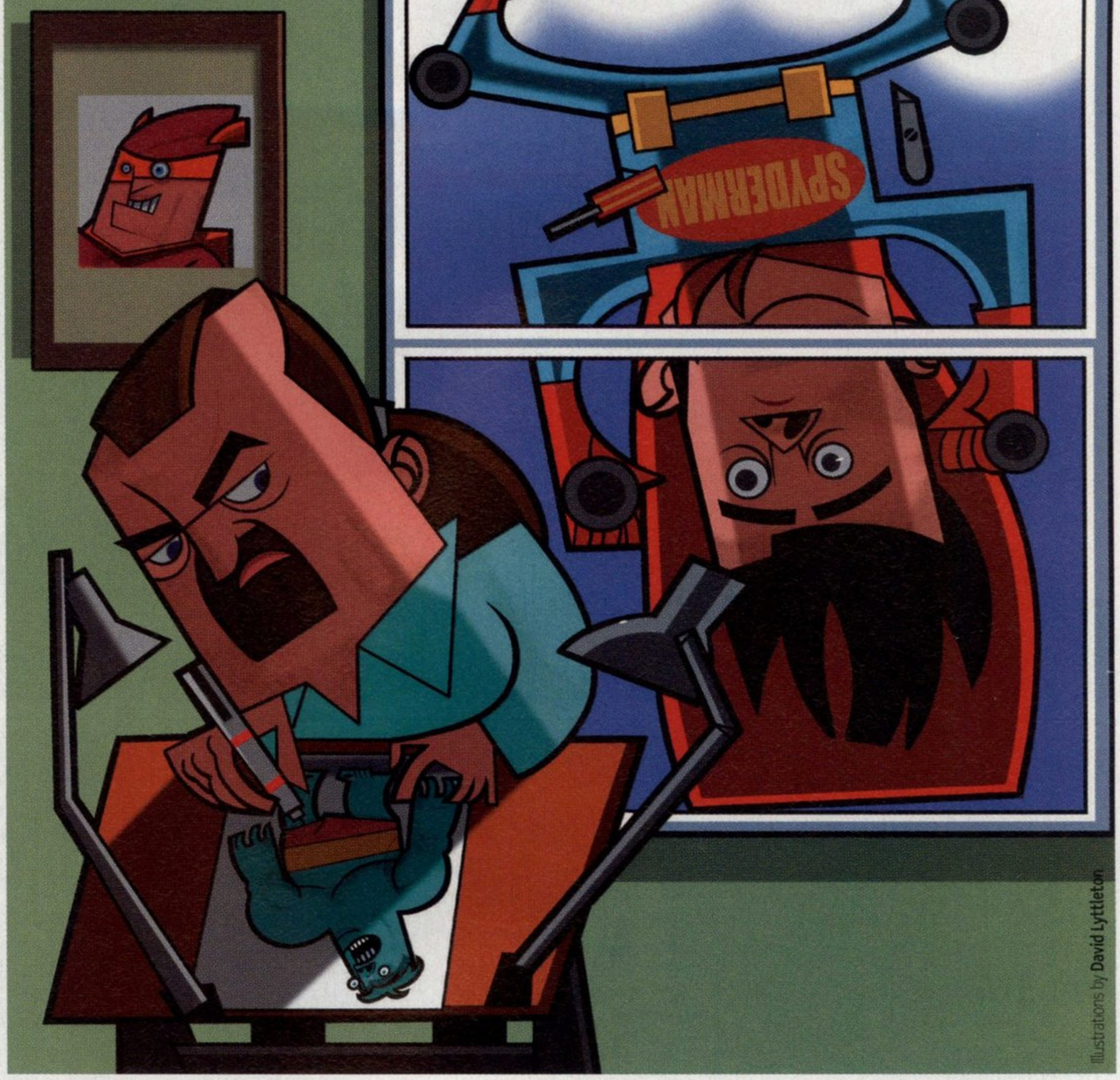

Illustrations by David Lyttleton

The Spy is in deep meditation, sitting cross-legged in an orchard, cherry blossom drifting on the breeze. A tree falls in the forest, but nobody cares. One hand claps. Years of infiltrating development houses (read: rooting around in their bins) revealing the secrets within, have taken their toll. The Spy's spiritual journey has brought him to a monastery, high in the Himalayas. There he will find enlightenment in the updated Pratimoksha, the set of rules that govern the lives of Buddhist monks: "A bhikshu (monk) who plays electronic games including those on the computer, commits an offence for which he must express regret." The Spy has come to atone for his sins. He's doing so much apologising he's already planned his next round of remorse.

How on earth is he going to find time to say sorry for indulging in the **Marvel Superhero** MMO to be published by Vivendi? The Spy understands that players will be able to don the over-pants of any of the 4,700 odd library of officially licensed superheroes. It goes some way to explaining Marvel's recent legal threats to the creators of another superhero MMORPG, **City of Heroes**. Marvel released a tersely worded statement, outlining their plans to bring civil action against Cryptic Studios for "direct, contributory, and vicarious copyright infringement… arising out of Defendants creation, distribution and facilitation of the computer game *City of Heroes*. Defendants' 'creation engine' facilitates, and indeed encourages, players to create and utilise Heroes that are nearly identical in name, appearance and characteristics to characters belonging to Marvel." Marvel want more than a quick apology – they're suing for maximum possible damages. The Spy fears for his own Spyderman – small, deadly, and able to conjure rumours in ten seconds flat.

The writer of the **Doom** movie, Dave Callaham, is following similar, pre-disaster remorse policies to The Spy. In an open letter to Doom fans he admitted that the film's direction is being decided by Hollywood interests, rather than a sense of faith to the source material. "The film has steadily moved away from the realm of fandom and more toward the realm of traditional Hollywood interests. It's not been ideal, in my opinion, but I did what I could when I could, and I stand by that. No film adaptation can ever match expectations of the original fans."

That's in contrast to Mark Skaggs of EA LA. Straight after finishing **Battle for Middle-Earth**, he's quietly slipped details of the next game in the **Command & Conquer: Red Alert** series to the fans. His team will be "leveraging the SAGE" (a reference to the technology that powers both *BfME* and *Command & Conquer: Generals*) in the New Year. More details soon. On a similar front, Elixir Studios, home of teensy weensy dev idol Demis Hassabis, have announced **Evil Genius 2**, with multiplayer world domination. A super-villain never apologises. They never say they're sorry. Spy out.

Pssst! It's...

The Spy

Dear reader. I'll be wearing a red rose and your dressing gown. Enjoy the bath. You're out of soap. Kisses. The Spy.

The Spy is sorry for everything.

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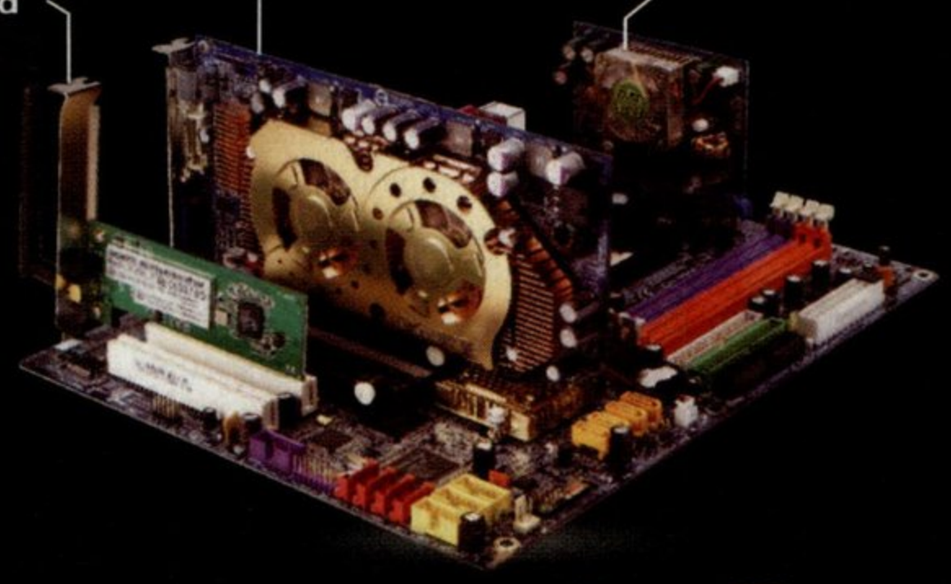

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Eyewitness Interview

Sid Speaks...

Mister Meier on bringing back a classic... or two.

A novel inclusion - comely chicks to hit on... Nice one Sid.

The man is a legend, arguably the most famous strategy game developer on the planet, but most of all Sid Meier is a quiet, thoughtful game designer that's admirably humble for a man who has accomplished so much.

Dan caught up with Sid to get his thoughts on the successful remake of Pirates, game design, and the next big thing…

PCGA: *What's it like to successfully remake a seventeen year old classic?*

SM: It's interesting, you kind of know basically that it was going to work somehow, because the first game worked. You don't have the same thing when you're making something new - "Is this going to be fun?" So it allows you to concentrate more on presentation, animation - the things like that. It also gives you an opportunity to fix a few things that you realise now you would have done differently the first time, and to add a few new things tht the technology allows.

PCGA: *How have the way the expectations of gamers changed the way you looked at bringing Pirates! into the 21st century?*

SM: The largest change would be the areas of graphics, sound, presentation and interface. In terms of gameplay we're a little bit smarter in that we've (developers) learned some things and have created some new genres. I think the gameplay has changed the least, what's changed is in the original Pirates you had to use your imigination to fill in a lot of the things that we couldn't show you, literally. With the new game we're able to show you a lot more of what the Carribean looks like, what the characters look like, how they act, what's actually happening – I think that's what people expect these days.

You kind of know basically that it was going to work...

However with gameplay, that was certainly one of the things we thought about a lot at the beginning – Do we want to create a whole new game? Does the old gameplay hold up?
I think what people were asking for was the experience they got with the old game, combined with modern technology and modern graphics. So we kept the majority of the gameplay experience that worked well from the original, added a few new things and cleaned a couple of bits up, but essentially we stuck true to the same basic ideas.

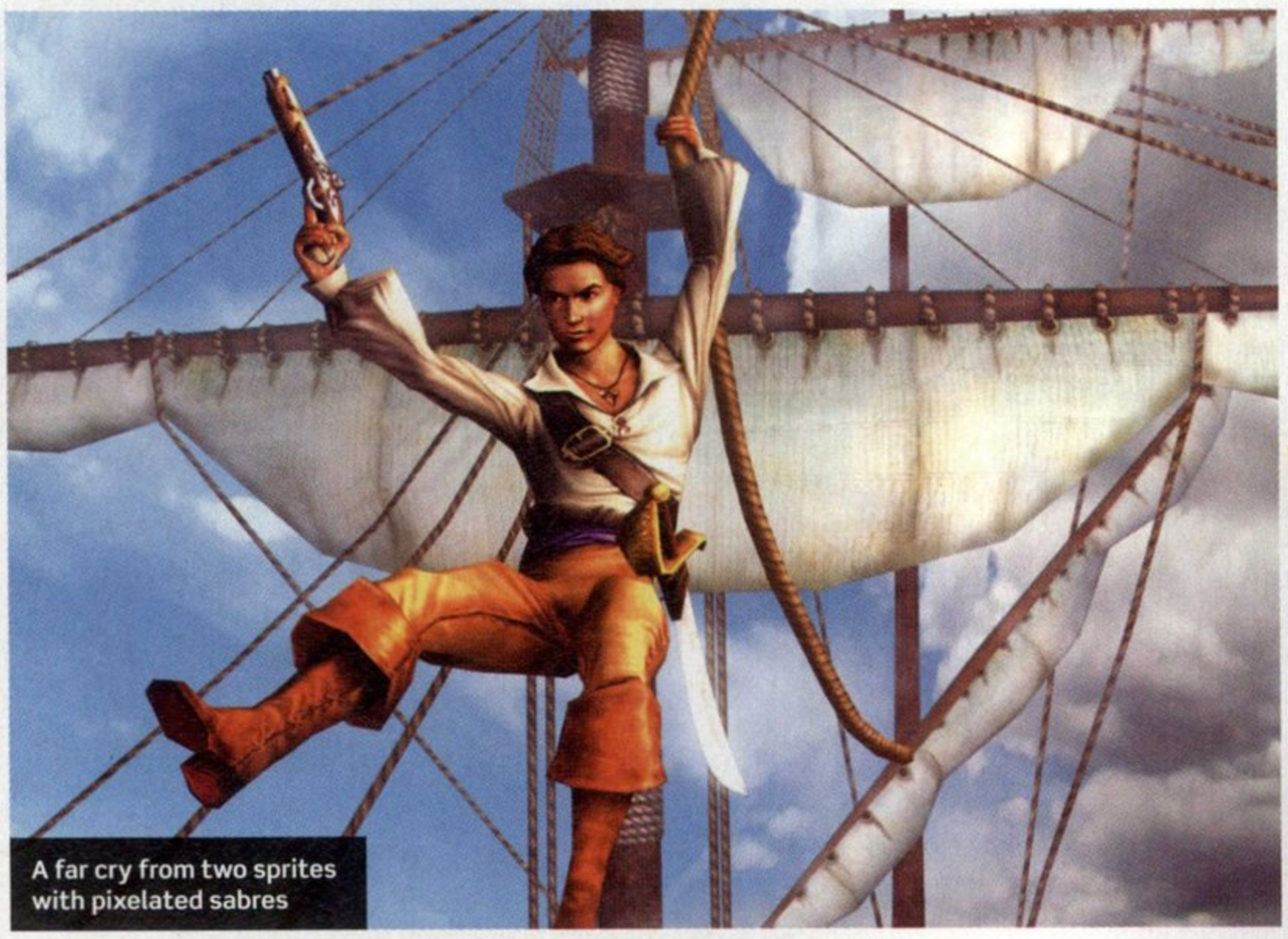
PCGA: *Were there ideas or plans to work in a multiplayer aspect to Pirates!?*

SM: We did discuss that in the early stages – "How can we make this a multiplayer experience?" and all the things that we thought of would really compromise the single player game. There's something about having your own ship and making your own destiny, being able to go wherever you want to go and do whatever you wanted to do that was essential to the gameplay experience, and that would really have to be compromised if you had a lot of other players. For example if you went into a ship battle, and somebody else wasn't in the battle, they'd have to wait around for you to be finished. Really, there were a lot of gameplay issues with the game that we wanted to make as a single player game to translate that to multiplayer.

PCGA: *With another Civ game on the way, can you give us an opinion on what's happened to strategy gaming since RTS took off and dominated? What can still be done with turn-based strategy?*

SM: I think one thing RTS games have done is establish a standard of streamline interface that we really can learn from. A next generation of *Civilization* may use some of the conventions that everyone is familiar with from other strategy games. Certainly using 3D technology and things like that will allow us to do interesting things in terms of presentation, camera angles, and different points of view that you've never seen in a *Civilization* game. The world and the civilisation that you create will come alive in an interesting way.

But I think in the turn-based strategy world the kind of experience that we try and create with 6,000 years of history, mix in diplomacy, economics and military all together – I think that requires the kind of time that you think a turn based game will give you.


A far cry from two sprites with pixelated sabres

README

Publisher Atari
Link www.firaxis.com
PCGA Score: Issue 28 - 91%

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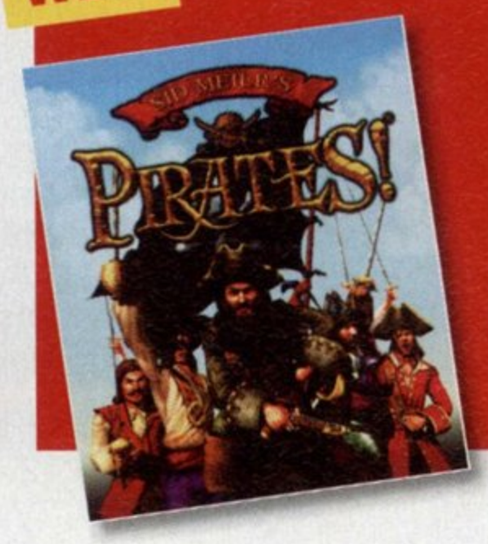

Tell us in 100 words or less what you think Sid Meier's best game is and why, and you could stand to win a copy of Pirates and a poster signed by Sid himself! Ah-argh!
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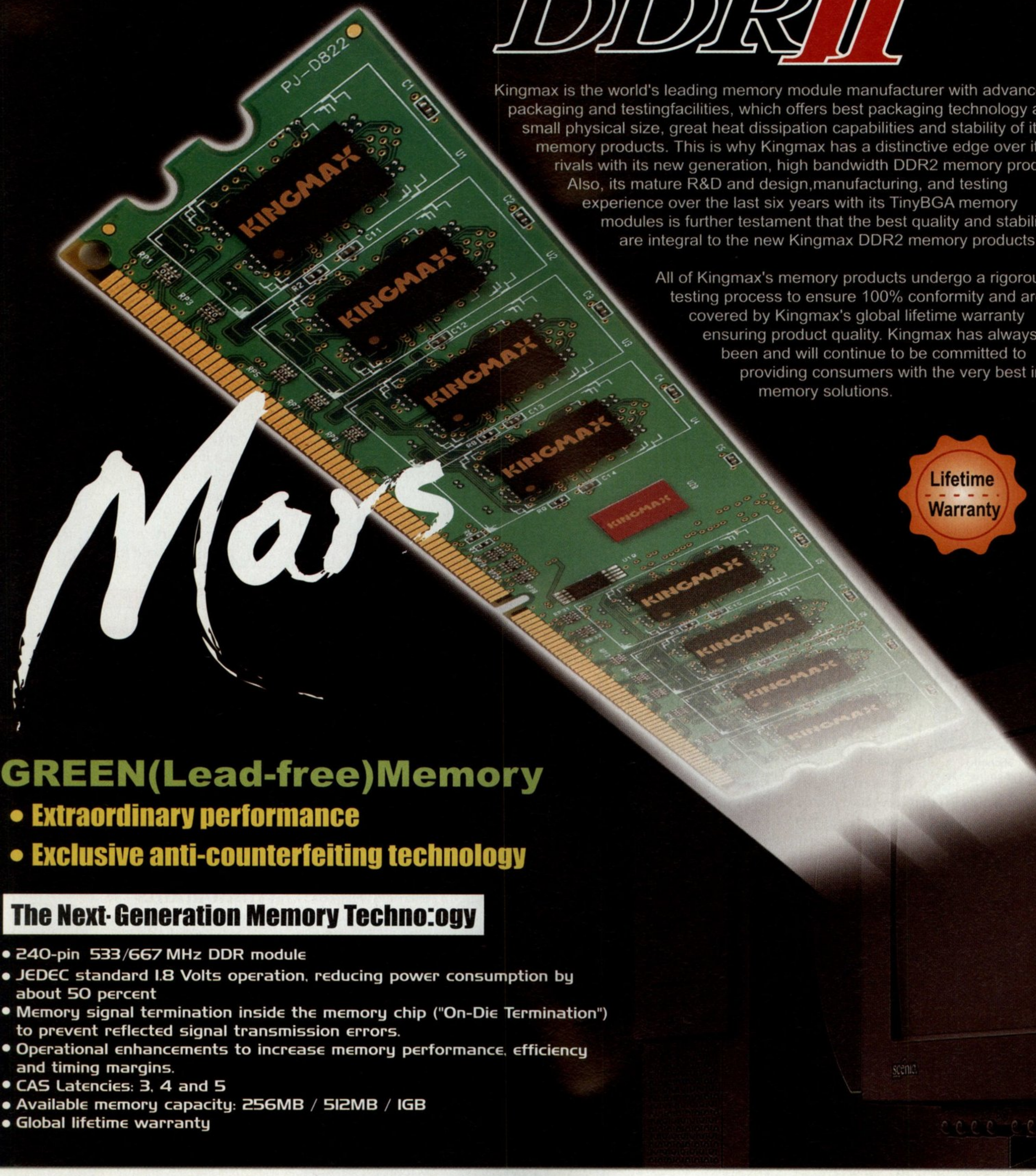

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Product Awards & Honors

THIS IS HARDCORE

The good, the bad, and the generic

Eliot 'Which witch?' Fish

THIS IS...

RPG/ADVENTURE

Was *Vampire the Masquearde: Bloodlines* a first-person action game with RPG elements or an RPG with action game elements? Don't care? This gradual fusion of the RPG with other genres is certainly a wonderful thing for gaming, but could we soon one day find that there is no longer such a thing as a "pure" RPG? You know, character interaction and exploration, with stat crunching combat based on our character's myriad of skills and not the speed of our mouse twitch skills. It's a result of technology pushing RPGs to the First Person, or just glorious 3D in general, and just about every RPG on the release schedule incorporates "intense real-time action". None of the classic RPGs that championed this genre ever needed those, what's changed?

Bewitched

One such Action RPG is The Witcher (www.thewitcher.com), a game based on the work of Polish author, Andrzej Sapkowski. The game uses motion-capture for its combat animation, realistic physics, and a dynamic combo system for attacks - all entirely mouse-driven. Developer, CD Projekt, have re-worked BioWare's Aurora engine for some truly startling results, and we can expect to be installing it by the end of the year.

We just hope the game turns out to have more witch than twitch - keeping it an RPG with action elements rather than something that requires crack reflexes to appreciate.

Even prettier than that blonde in that cruddy sit-com...

Like it slow? Email Eliot at **eliotf@derwenthoward.com.au**

Michelle 'Shining' Starr

THIS IS...

ONLINE

Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates, the MMORPG that combines piracy, puzzlin', and über-cute Lego-style graphics (and also features one of the most creative swear filters I've ever encountered), is moving out of cyberspace after two years as a free download. The title has been picked up by Ubisoft, for release in the second quarter of 2005.

Puzzle Pirates is a curious blend of RPG elements and Tetris-style puzzles that take the place of sailing and battling, played from a 2D isometric perspective, not to mention garbled swashbucklin' lingo and overuse of the word "avast!"

The game will come with a month's free subscription, after which players will be asked to subscribe for a fee that is little more than nominal.

Sad it's gone 'official' but it's a good sign for those developers contemplating making a MMOG post-*World of Warcraft*.

Who's still scared of agents?

Woah!

The Matrix phenomenon has fizzled out somewhat, but Matrix Online, the new MMORPG currently in beta, is slated for release in April.

Aside from the standard MMOG fare, and a continuation of the movie storyline, the game will include one nifty feature that could mean very great things – something the creators are calling "ability code". This gives your player new abilities (duh) and knowledge, but unlike other MMOGs, it can be swapped and exchanged between players.

Want cash back? Message Michelle at **michelle@derwenthoward.com.au**

THIS IS...

SIMULATION

Tim 'Legally Blonde' Stone

Shy publishers, a largely disinterested specialist press, populist competition from the likes of the *Battlefield* series... God, it's tough being a WWII simulation developer at present. In fact, it's difficult to imagine how it could get any tougher.

Difficult but not impossible. Multi-billion dollar US weapons manufacturer Northrop have just figured out a really neat way.

First you find a WWII PC sim like say, *Pacific Fighters*, that makes no secret of the fact that it includes iconic US kites like the Grumman Hellcat and the Vought Corsair (planes manufactured 60 years ago by companies you now own). You then unleash your lawyers, stinging the makers/publishers of said product for a *(substantial sum of money)* for having the audacity to openly recreate, in virtual aluminium, said machines.

Japanese updates are unaffected.

Time bandits

Ingenious isn't it? Making companies pay through the nose for the right to honestly, *accurately* recreate historical events. Wait, it gets better. Not only does this course of action further line your already amply-lined pockets, it forces the developer concerned to cancel planned free updates and add-ons, turning your name into an object of scorn in the flight simulation community.

For the sake of the genre, lets pray this sad case isn't the thin end of the wedge, the first cuckoo of a sim-strangling spring.

Disenfranchised? Contact Tim at **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au**

Dan "the Despot' Toose

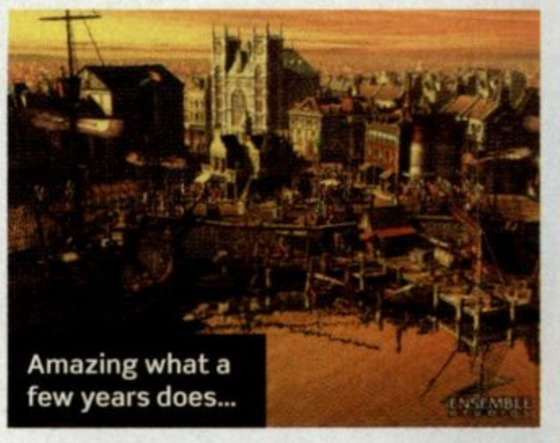
THIS IS...

STRATEGY/MANAGEMENT

If Microsoft owe one PC game development studio big time it's Ensemble. At a time where the OS giant was desperate to earn some respect from the hardcore community, they delivered *Age of Empires*. This was the RTS that spanned time in a way only Civ really had, offering whole 'ages' of history. If you loved that, be warned *Age of Emipes 3* looks to offer less of a time warp than its forefathers, starting in the 18th century. With gunpowder a starter, where's the scope for hugely significant change or a technology milestone in *Age of Empires 3*?

DIY Superpower

First, here's the next limiting factor – AoE3 is about the colonization and development of North America, and American native Indians play a part. It's a historical period many here care little for, but we've got information that Ensemble have found a new way to look at technology development in an RTS that's more in touch with reality – Nationalistic ambitions and drive. You think that doesn't matter? Then how did a poor European nation in its darkest hour go on to almost conquer the world sixty years ago? They had a vision - albeit from a twisted, nasty little man.



Amazing what a few years does...

More on this next issue when we can finally squeeze in the massive preview of *Age of Empires 3* we've done. It's looking good enough to swallow an American history lesson for.

Open diplomatic channels with Dan: dan@derwenthoward.com.au

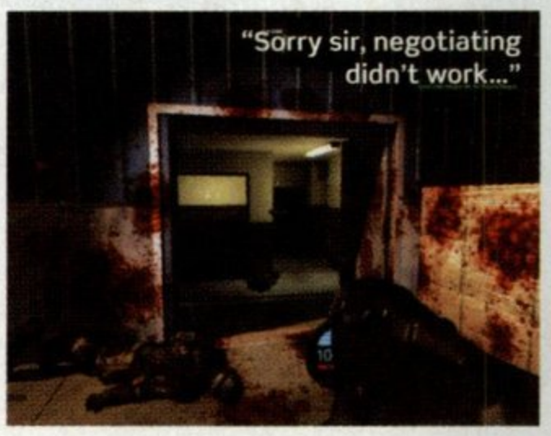
THIS IS...

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

Asher 'the Lurker' Moses

While the developers of *F.E.A.R.* have been fairly tight-lipped about the game's single-player component, we managed to take a sneak peek at the multiplayer mode and it looks like Monolith's got another killer on its hands - a Counter-Strike killer to be exact. In a nutshell, *F.E.A.R.* multiplayer can best be described as a blood-drenched cocktail whose ingredients consist of *CS's* military teamplay, Quake's DM style and Doom 3's visuals.

The most unique aspect is the inclusion of melee attacks, which range from pistol-whipping to special combos such as a torpedo jump kick or an instant-kill slide attack. The obligatory DM and team DM modes are present, with some cool additions such as a slow motion power-up (ala the *Max Payne* series) that players/teams can fight over for a huge speed advantage.

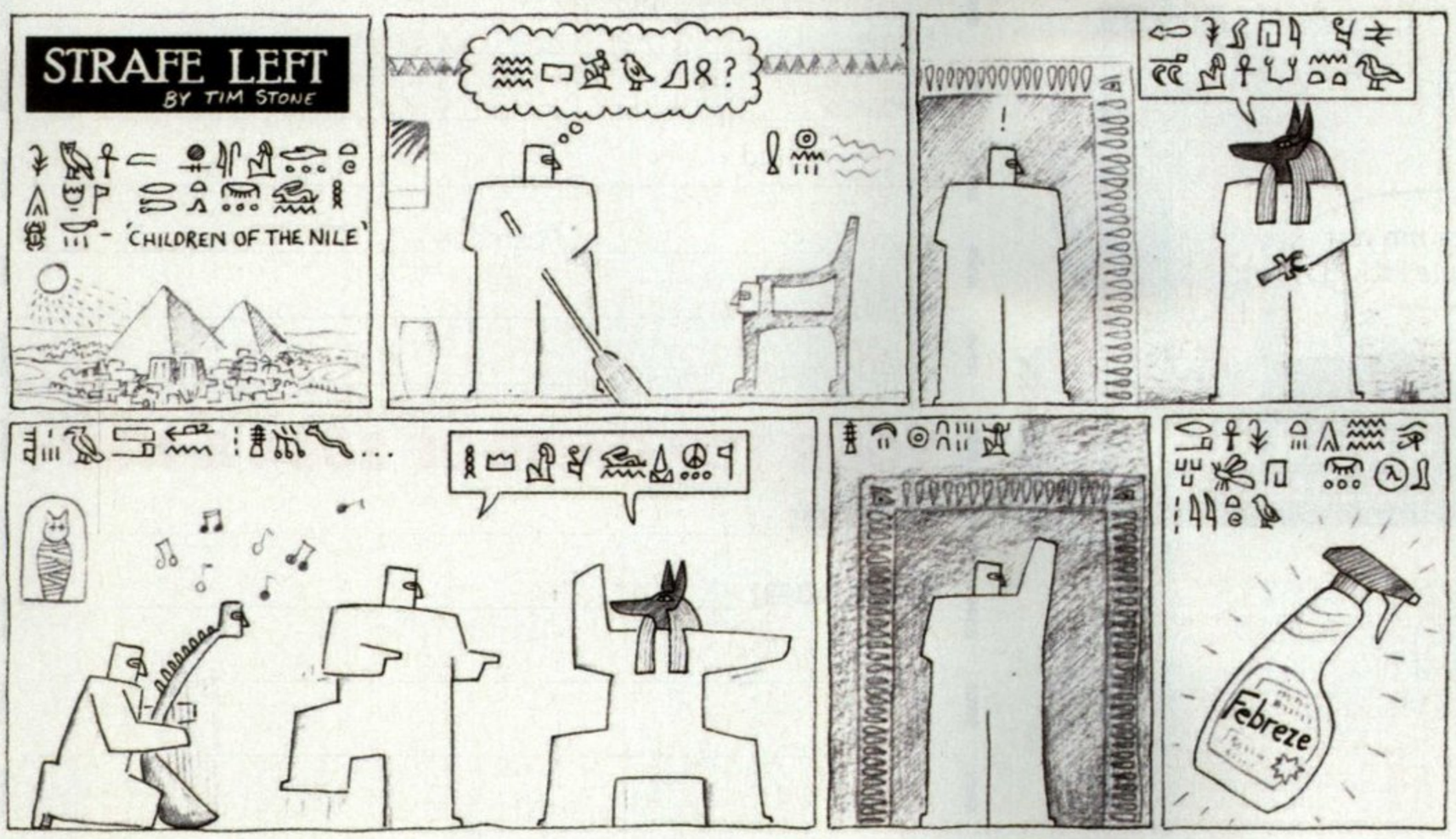


"Sorry sir, negotiating didn't work..."

Be Afraid...

Maps are for the most part dark, claustrophobic indoor areas, encouraging close quarters combat and frenetic action. This combat is enhanced by the exquisite graphics engine, as shadows and lighting can be tactically used in order to surprise the enemy. Even your own shadow can give your position away moments before you storm out from behind a corner.

Got gun? Annoy Asher at asher@derwenthoward.com.au



James 'Space Ghost' Cottee

THIS IS...

ODDBALL

For many PCGA readers, Adult Swim is the real reason for subscribing to Pay TV. During that crucial late-night window on the Cartoon Network, crappy old cartoons from the '60s and '70s are re-mixed and re-voiced, turning animation sludge into comedy gold. The imagery: absurd. The laughter: paralysing. The appeal: irresistible.

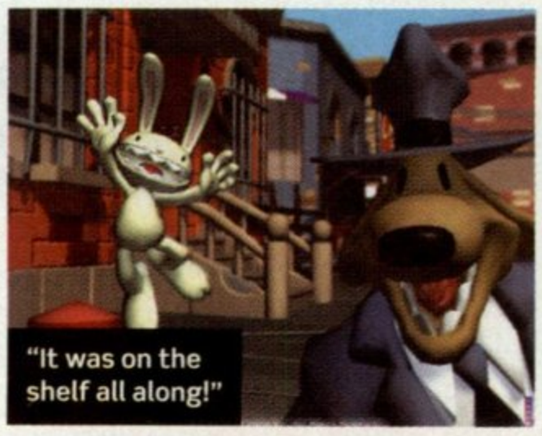
This niche cultural phenomenon has caught the IP eye of a resurgent Midway, and the burgeoning publisher has done a deal with the masters of Adult Swim. The agreement covers not one but five properties: Aqua Teen Hunger Force, The Brak Show, Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law, Sealab 2021, and Space Ghost Coast to Coast.

Can't wait until late 2006 for the first titles to roll off the line? Mosey on over to the Adult Swim website and sample some above-average Flash goodies.
www.adultswim.com

Filthy Luger

Remember *Sam & Max*? Their latest video game adventure is still on the scrap heap. There were excited rumours in recent weeks that German adventure game start-up Mad Brain would pick up the rights to the cancelled *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, but it was all a big misunderstanding with the English-speakers over at LucasArts. Their reaction to the offer, correctly translated, was "no."

Telltale Games has hinted that they may've done a back-door deal for the rights to Steve Purcell's comic creations, but we're skeptical. Like the adventure genre itself, it seems the Freelance Police are dead and buried.



"It was on the shelf all along!"

Eldritch enthusiast? jive with James at jcottee@derwenthoward.com.au

THE PC GAMES ADDICT READER AWARDS

WIN AN ALIENWARE PC & 2004'S BEST GAMES!

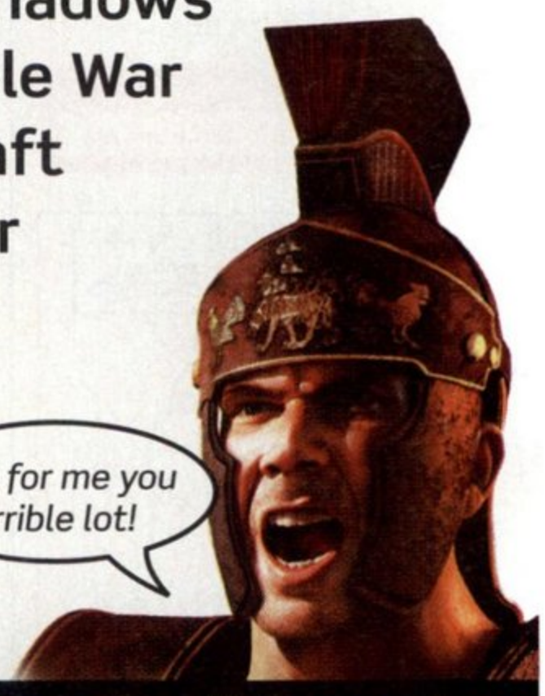
Last issue we told you what we thought the best games of 2004 were, and now it's your turn. Why would you want to bother? Well, the PCGA reader who can give us the best reason as to why their pick of 2004 was the best will pick up ten awesome games plus a modified Alienware Aurora 7500 gaming PC - That's why!

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO

- Fill in your details
- Tell us your pick of the games released in 2004
- Tell us why in 50 words or less

WHAT YOU CAN WIN

- A modified Aurora 7500 Alienware PC (specs over)
- Pro Evolution Soccer 4
- Sid Meier's Pirates!
- Thief: Deadly Shadows
- Deus Ex: Invisible War
- World of Warcraft
- Rome: Total War
- V8 Supercars 2
- The Sims 2
- Half-Life 2
- Doom 3



Send your votes by 5 April 2005 to:
PC Games Addict, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

CONDITIONS...

1. Entry is open to all permanent residents of Australia and NZ.
2. It is a game of skill and chance plays no part in determining winners.
3. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Prizes cannot be transferred, or redeemed for cash.
4. The judging for the competition will take place 11/04/05, at Derwent Howard Pty Ltd (the promoter), Level 3, 75 Grafton Street Bondi Junction NSW ABN 400 958 728 895. The promoter will not be held liable for any late, lost or misdirected mail.
6. Employees, immediate families of the promoter, agencies and companies associated with the promotion are ineligible to enter.
7. Winner will be notified by telephone or email.
8. Prize values are the recommended retail value as provided by the supplier, correct at the time of printing.
9. The promoter shall not be liable for any loss or damage whatsoever that is suffered (including but not limited to direct or consequential loss) or for any personal injury suffered or sustained in connection with any prize/s, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law.
10. Competition commences on 09/03/05 and concludes on 05/04/05, with last mail received.
11. All entries become the property of the promoter.

PC GAMES ADDICT
READER AWARDS

YOUR DETAILS

TITLE ☐MR ☐MRS ☐MS ☐MISS

Name_____

Address_____

_____

State_____ Postcode_____

Email_____

Telephone (inc. area code)_____

YOUR TOP GAME OF 2004 & WHY

Game: _____

Reason: _____

_____

_____

_____

WIN THIS PC!

THE BEST SYSTEMS!

VALUED AT $4,999

To help celebrate their recent arrival in Australia, our friends at **ALIENWARE** have put together a modified version of their **Aurora 7500** to plug into the monitor of one lucky PCGA reader.

THE SPECS:

- AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU
- ABit AV8 - VIA K8T800 Pro Motherboard
- ATI Radeon 9600XT 256MB, 128bit DDR, DVI, VGA & TV-out
- 1GB of Dual Channel DDR PC-3200XL RAM (2 x 512MB)
- Creative Audigy 2ZS 7.1 Surround Firewire
- Sony 16x Dual Layer DVD±R/W
- Window XP Professional
- Alienware Full-Tower case
- Alienware 480W Power Supply
- AlienWiring - Internal wire management system
- AlienCare - 1 Year Warranty
- Alienware T-Shirt & mousemat

PC Games Addict recommends gaming systems from:

ALIENWARE

SPACE WAR! What's been missing from Star Wars strategy? Space. *Empire at War* will put you in command of the Imperial or Rebel fleet, and, says Brett, battles will have an "almost classic naval feel." Tactics he mentions include hiding your entire fleet in an asteroid field for ambush, or targeting specific areas of a ship's superstructure.

TOYS! On the ground the traditional AT-ATs and AT-STs are joined by the rebellion's own tanks, and a new vehicle: the TIE-Crawler. The Crawler's built from recycled fighter parts, and saw action in the battle for Coruscant. It's a single-seat battle tank, driven by a set of treads bolted onto the base of its 'wings'.

For armchair Admiral Ackbars

Star Wars Empire at War

RELEASE SPRING

Last issue we flagged this one, and the appeal of a Star Wars strategy epic that offers both stunning space and terrestrial battles is obvious. What's not so clear as is how they will be linked together into a cohesive galaxy-wide campaign.

Brett Tosti, producer, suggests one possability. "*EaW* improves upon previous Star Wars strategy games because it takes the basic RTS formula and adapts it to fit the universe, rather than the other way around."

We suspect the crux lies in marrying the turn-based part of things with the action like *Rome* did. More on that very soon.

DAN TOOSE

ON THE DISC Liking the look of the next Star Wars game? Get a better look on the disc › Galleries

README

Publisher LucasArts
Developer Petroglyph
Link www.lucasarts.com
Finally, a strategy game for Generation X-wing.

ONLINE WAR! Extensive support for online multiplayer is planned. The dedicated can take part in an extended campaign, plotting the downfall of the entire galaxy, the more fainthearted of us can fit in a quiet one-off skirmish at lunchtime. Regularly updated ladders will separate the short from the stormtroopers.

NO AT-AT RUSH! The more unorthodox tactics of Star Wars will take pride of place. "That includes speeders being able to entangle an AT-AT's legs," says Brett. "We have repulsor lift vehicles that can travel over water, shields that block certain kinds of weapons but not others." Creative use of resources should always carry the day.

THE PITCH

Be a Star Wars general. Crush rebel armies under the stompy feet of your AT-ATs.

SURFACE PRESSURE! The signature battles of the series, like the assault on Hoth, will feature, with one upgrade: hope. According to Brett, skilled players should be able to reverse the tide of Imperial walkers. "In normal gameplay, retreating would be the exception since a skilled player can achieve victory even against a superior force."

STRATEGY MATTERS! The shape of your victory is determined in an epic campaign mode. You're able to plot raids on planets from a map view (like *Rome: Total War*), then zoom in for a more hands-on piece of the action. Owning a planet means an additional source of income for your forces, and therefore a greater military presence.

A return ticket to Waterloo

Imperial Glory

RELEASE AUTUMN

Maybe if Eidos's merchandising wallahs had any imagination then we'd have strolled out of their recent *Imperial Glory* preview event weighed down with bottles of Napoleon brandy and pairs of logo-emblazoned gum boots rather than predictable (but welcome) armfuls of T-shirts, pens and office furniture (*Please return the chairs* – Legal Ed). *IG*, you see, is a strategy game that the Little Corporal and the Iron Duke would have loved, had their steam-powered, mahogany-cased Georgian PCs had the poke to run it. *Napoleon: Total War* in everything but name, with its combination of turn-based empire management and real-time 3D ructions will – come spring – allow anyone with an expansionist bone in their body to completely rewrite early 19th century European history.

THE PITCH
A lucky day for Lucky Jacks. It's *Napoleonic Total War* but with brilliant naval clashes.

That fractious continent and adjacent areas of Africa and Asia is portioned into a jigsaw of 50 territories and 30 maritime regions for game purposes, and shared out among five major powers (Britain, France, Austro-Hungary, Russia and Prussia) and a shoal of small neutral 'NPC' states. For Monarchists, choosing which nation to lead through the 40-year grand campaign won't be a problem. The rest of us will want to weigh-up elements such as unique units (sabre-wielding Cossacks and be-sporraned Black Watch) and inherent *Civ*-style cultural traits before committing.

Keen to emphasise the formative influence of games other than *Total War*, the devs cited other characteristically *Civ* features like the extremely shady

Tailor fire to immobilise, sink or depopulate

tech tree, the wonder-esque 'quests' and the age-linked choice of political systems, but it wasn't really until the presentation took to the waves that we saw anything dramatically different.

Unlike its august rival, *Imperial Glory* models wet warfare with the same thoroughness as it models dry. Here are breeze-ruffled oceans, clanging bells and creaking timbers. Ships-of-the-line, brigs and frigates tacking for position before loosing smoke-wreathed salvos against sailcloth, sailors and salt-stained hulls. Not only can you tailor fire to immobilise, sink or depopulate an enemy tub, you can come alongside and try to board the rascal, too.

Inland clashes don't appear too shabby either. We witnessed several spectacular skirmishes, being particularly impressed by the soldier-skittling carnage wrought by speeding cannonballs and the naturalistic way individual infantrymen took advantage of cover such as buildings, barricades and trees. The scale of battles (around 2,000 units max) and the choice of formations (three basic) may not be quite on a par with *RTW* or *Cossacks* but the makers claim that there'll be ample compensation in terms of animation quality and the adeptness of the AI. If the latter assurance proves true then we at PCGA will be naming spirits and rubber footwear after Pyro on release day. If untrue we'll be packing them off to St Helena on the first available sloop.

TIM STONE

README

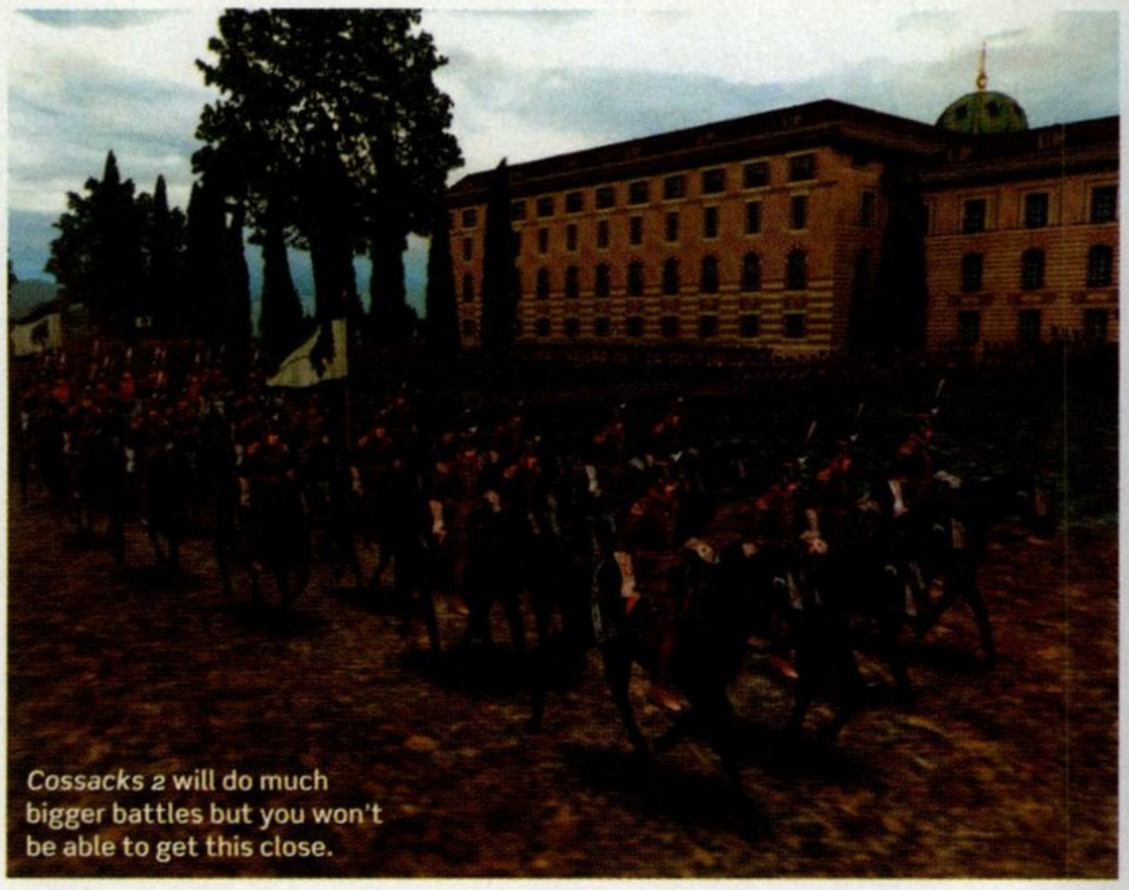
Publisher Eidos
Developer Pyro
Link www.imperialglory.com
Pyro take a leaf – in fact a whole tree – out of Creative Assembly's book. Rather promising.

Creating a wind-wise naval AI has been a challenge, apparently.

Expect endless forum debates about musket reload times.

There's no attempt to model towns or cities on the battlefield, but 'capital' maps will feature landmarks like palaces and forts.

Muskets can be upgraded to MP5s over time. Possibly.



Cossacks 2 will do much bigger battles but you won't be able to get this close.

COMING THROUGH
Capturing one area makes it easier to take those that share a border – you don't need to build or capture as many big pointy stone things, which is obviously quicker.

FLAME RESERVES
It's important to keep good stocks of fire in warehouses in case... oh, this was actually our origami warehouse. At least the citizen manager makes it simple to assign workers to repairs. Phew.

RED ZONE
No, not restricted parking or a bus lane – though you still can't park those tanks there, pal – but territorial borders. *EEII* is unusual in requiring you to capture zones rather than just little bits of land.

THE HORROR
Look at this lonely soldier, bleeding numbly and staring at the sky, wondering for the first time why there's no sun up there – just the giant, concentrating face of a nerd.

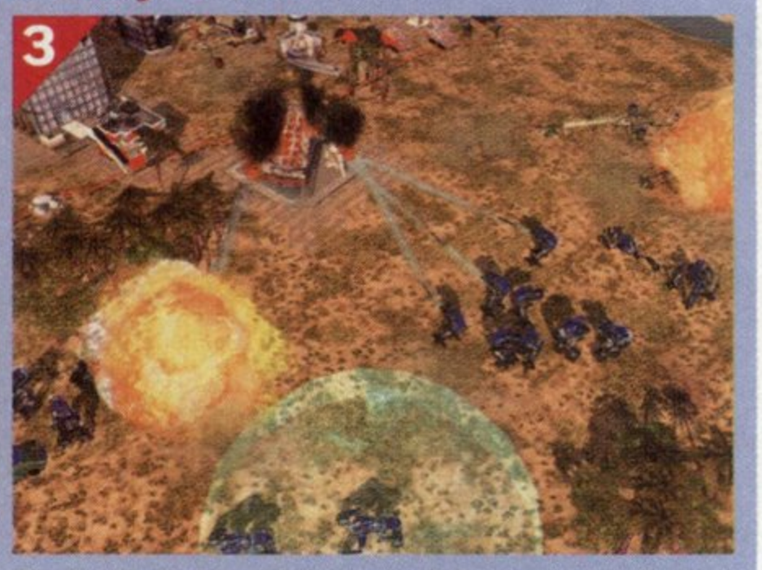
ARMS RACE
With so much technology available, research is key. You might think these tanks look hard, but if your opponent has just discovered the robot factory you're going to look a bit stupid.

THE 15 AGES OF MAN (AND HIS TANKS)

Well, three of them, anyway. Welcome to the PC Games Addict Accelerated History of Time

Kick-off is during the Stone Age. Cue hunter-gathering, rudimentary spears, creaking catapults and interesting religions. School history lessons are mercifully short.

Whoa, it's time for the Renaissance already. Elaborate hats share screen space with the wonders of cannon and bridges. Da Vinci's helicopter remains a doodle.



The Synthetic Epoch brings with it mechanical walkers and future-tanks. Meanwhile, ordinary folks eat meals in pill form and go to work in nicely pressed tin foil suits.

Get off my land!

Empire Earth II

RELEASE AUTUMN

"Armada!" "No, *I'm* harder!" Ahahaha.

The little-known Balsawood Age.

THE PITCH
RTS carnage skips through history from hairies with clubs to robots with lasers for smiles.

Empire Earth II is, I'm assured, cool. It hangs in all the right clubs, owns property and dates actresses. These are only rumours, mind you, and what's worse is that I started them. Yet Ian Davis, CEO of Mad Doc and creative director of *EEII*, maintains the new "sole survivor" mechanism is "one of the coolest things," that the sound is "really cool," that the unusual goals lead to "two cool moments taking territory" and that the war plan system is "another cool thing." That's enough cool to sink a luxury liner. It's also a lot of new stuff.

Empire Earth was big: the sequel is bigger. The 14 civilisations enjoy 30 percent more units, 80 percent more buildings and bouncier, shinier hair. Perhaps more importantly, they're far easier to command. A 'citizen manager' replaces the awkwardness of clicking on scurrying individuals, and with rapid expansion and advance being so fundamental – you can't fight a stealth bomber with a horse with an angry man waving a stick from its back – that's a real bonus. Having micromanagement swallow macro time is no fun anyway.

Completing research in either the military, economic or imperial spheres awards you with a 'crown' and five minutes of overclocked powers – the ability to instantly finish buildings, for instance. But others can steal it, and with only three crowns, ten-player matches can become something of an arms race.

> I returned with a croissant in each hand

But not just an arms race, as that would be dull, despite the incredible scope. With *EEII* stretching from the stone age to a laser-powered future, it's possible to open up a tin of robotic whup-ass on an opponent who's little more than a man in a shed. However, everything's linked in an almost Zen-like way and it mostly evens out: upgraded troops from one epoch are a fair match for basic units from the next, for instance, and idle units fight automatically if attacked. In fact, I once returned with a croissant in each hand to find 'I' had wiped out an otherwise successful invader, leaving me as a surprised, pastry-flecked uberlord of all I surveyed.

The nerd slider still goes up to 11 (not literally), but even so this is no *Rome: Total War*. *Empire Earth II* wants to hide its complications and let you concentrate on overwhelming brutality instead. The need to acquire territories, for instance, not only adds easily graspable goals but fresh tactical problems – each area has a limit on fortifications, so if the current owner has reached that limit you can't introduce any of your own – you're forced to take the country on as it stands.

Conditional treaties mean alliances are also dynamic – the 'sole survivor' option means allies only agree in order to stab each other in the back more effectively. Detailed battle plans can be sent out for coordinated manoeuvres, while a 'quick start' function, where armies and resources are already built up, provides another friendly way into the real core of the game. Ease of use encourages risk-taking, so veterans and greenhorns should enjoy it, or so the thinking goes. So, will wandering back with just one croissant and a pain au chocolat work better? Reader, after three tries, the results were inconclusive on everything but the scales.

STEVE WILLIAMS

ON THE DISC Enjoy a relaxing demo of imperial carnage through the ages > Demo

README

Publisher Vivendi Universal
Developer Mad Doc
Link www.empireearth.com
Historical RTS action on an epic scale, and it's now officially cooler than ever.

Another world

The Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion

TICKET TO HELL

This is a pivotal scene in *Oblivion*, the opening of a hell-portal. According to *Elder Scrolls* legend, Hell will invade the Earth when a monarch fails to take the throne. When the current king passes away without leaving an heir, the task of tracking down a princely heir falls to you. Meanwhile, the demonic gateways begin to open. These aren't one-way passages, either: as foul beasts enter your world, you'll be able to leap into theirs, searching through fire and brimstone for high-level equipment and armour. When the ground begins to rumble, it's time to unpack those asbestos pants.

Technology is an amazing thing. It lets us see right through a skeleton's chest cavity.

Fantasy. Roll the world around your mouth. Fan-ta-sy. The *Elder Scrolls* games have always been about your own fantasies. What will *you* do in a fully realised, first-person world? For developers Bethesda that means creating a place, somewhere that you explore. It means shaping land, and populating entire continents with characters and incidental life. Then we, the players, are let loose to forge our particular legend within.

"My motto is 'great games are played, not made'," producer Todd Howard tells us. "You design something on paper, and spend three pages on it, and then you build it and players walk right by it. The best features are usually happy accidents – you didn't even know it was a feature until people started playing and had fun with it."

Bethesda's last game, *Morrowind*, was a completist RPG: the kitchen sink of the genre. It was massive: 600 odd hours of play time, vast swathes of landscape to traverse. What you did within that world was your choice: the faction you worked with, the missions you completed, the career path you took, was yours – a massively single-player RPG.

Building something on a similar scale, yet imbuing it with unprecedented graphical detail is a Big Job. Grass textures don't just magic themselves into existence. "We tend to produce our games in layers," explains Todd. "We do a base level of content, and then add on it." *Oblivion* already exists as a working world. Testers are journeying through it already, having their own *Elder Scrolls* adventure. As time passes, their feedback will be taken on board, and added into the game. As the developers make 'passes' over the game, more features, more quests, more detail is added. Until one day, the player is butt-naked and swinging punches at the town mayor.

THE PITCH
Explore the outer limits of a sprawling, luxurious RPG world. In any way you choose.

An explanation. A good friend of mine decided to forgo Christmas presents for his brother in favour of customised *Morrowind* saved games. He'd set up situations, burn the save file to CD, and post them to his home. His most dastardly creation involved running the player character, naked, into the start city, Seyda Neen, ▶

punching the mayor in the face, and fleeing. The town guards would naturally give chase, keen either for him to pay a fine, (unlikely) or to lop off his head (extremely likely). In a nearby forest, he'd pick a single daisy, sit down, and save. His brother would have to pick up the pieces.

The point of this: imagination counts. Craft your own fantasy, and let it run. That's why the developers are ensuring that the game is up and running early – allowing the playtesters to flesh out the world. One early result of this approach is physically modelling arrows. Rather than them disappearing after use, they'll stay, pin-cushioning a corpse. Post skirmish, you can trek over to the victim and refill your quiver.

Combat itself is to be based around the newly implemented physics engine, based on the same Havok technology that powers *Half-Life 2*. Dice-rolls and abstraction are minimised. Impact is everything. "We're not making a twitch game," explains Todd, "but we are trying to make combat a more involving process, more of a spatial event. We want lots of movement, lots of action." Musclebound heroes won't be given a free run of the world – you can be a wizard one day, and a warrior the next. "We think we have to make the ultimate thief game, the ultimate sword game and the ultimate magic game," says Todd, evangelising Bethesda's vision. "We want you to be able to play the whole game without having to pull up a sword if you don't want to."

For those more interested in interactions other than 'bash', Bethesda promise to overhaul some outdated *Morrowind* systems, particularly those that drove incidental characters. Men and women now walk through scripted paths, chatting among themselves. In a major commitment, Bethesda promise that every line of speech will be spoken. That leads to new types of challenge, like hanging around in the local tavern, eavesdropping on local rumours and picking up titbits. No longer will you be confronted by the fixed stares of last generation's polygonal puppets - an element of body language was direly needed. When you want to chat to a fellow adventurer they'll turn and face you. Fearful characters cower. The aggressive narrow their eyes. The guy you upset six hours ago still bears a grudge. The fantasy multiplies around you and your actions – because you're a part of the world too.

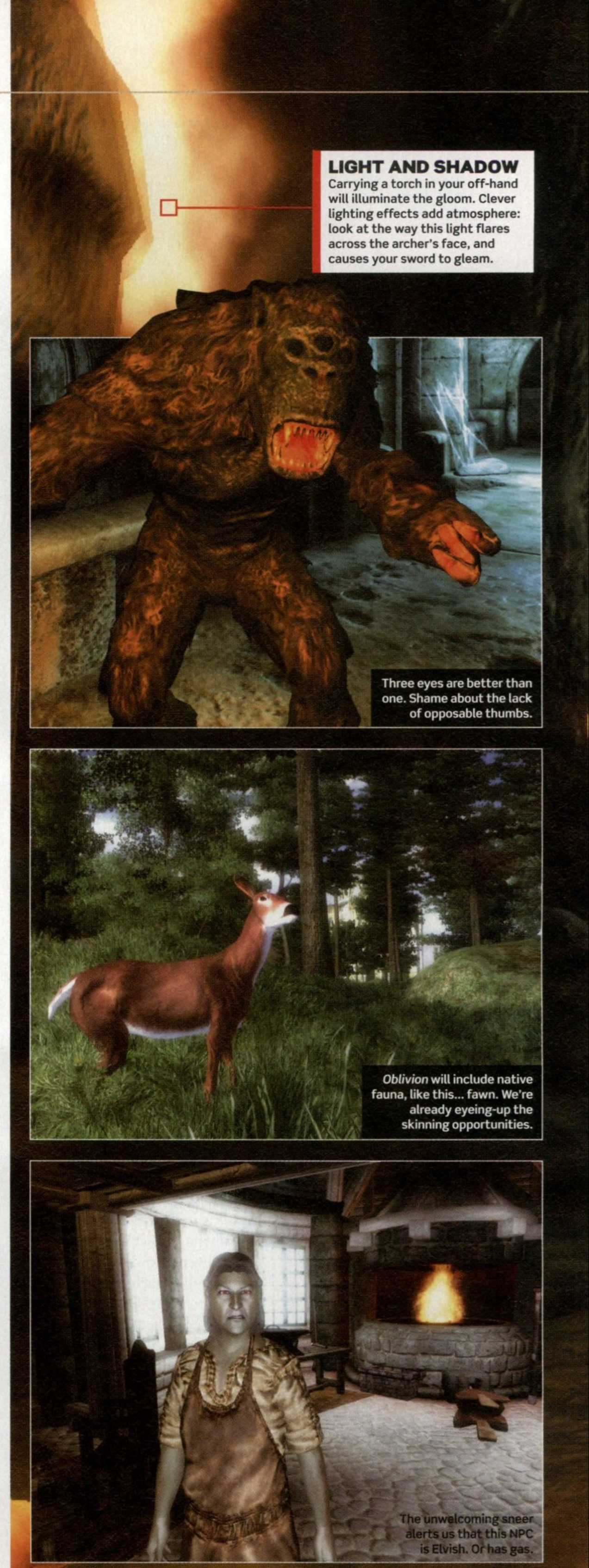
Six hours later, he still bears a grudge

That's what any serious gamer has ever wanted – a world that knows you're there. A place where we can go and do what we like and watch the results of our actions cascade through the world. When you can see it in their eyes... that's when the fantasy comes to life.

TIM EDWARDS

README

Publisher Take 2
Developer Bethesda
Link www.elderscrolls.com
More detail, more freedom. We're already planning our time in *Oblivion*.



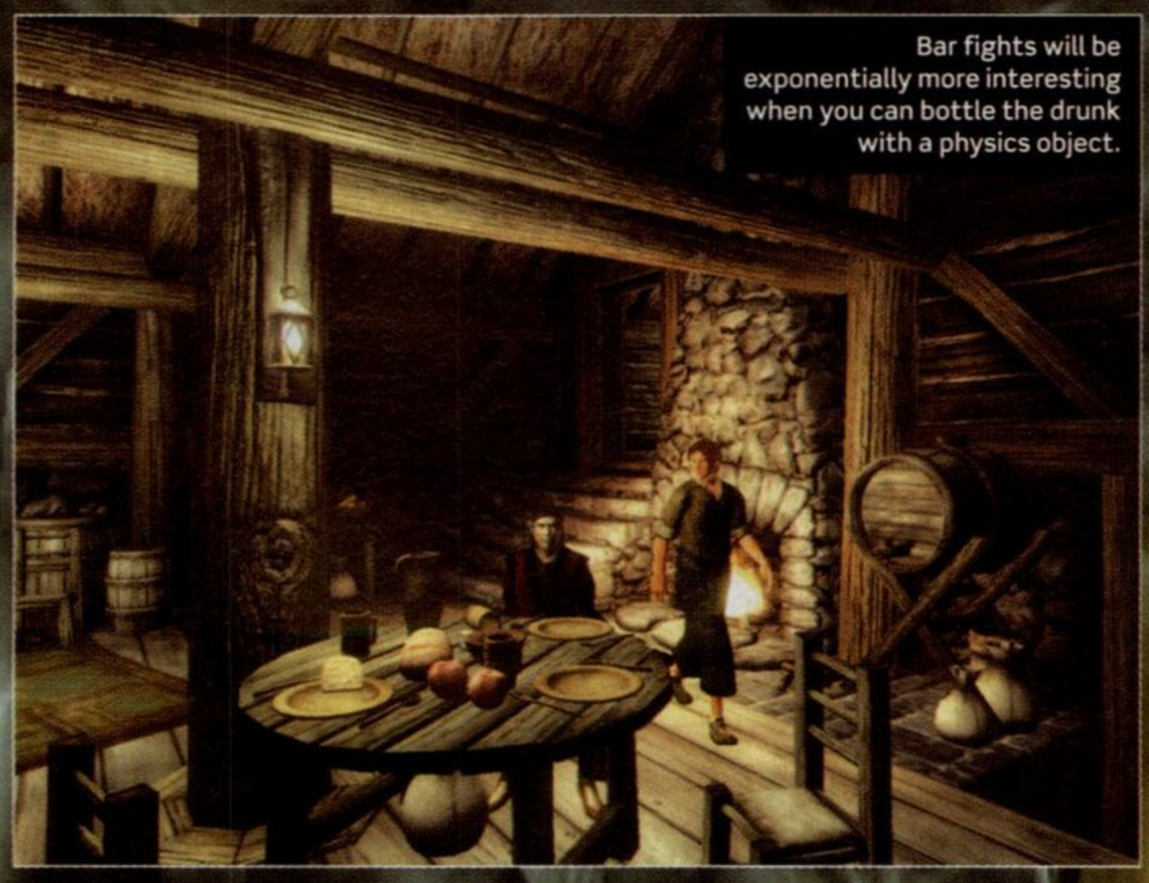
LIGHT AND SHADOW
Carrying a torch in your off-hand will illuminate the gloom. Clever lighting effects add atmosphere: look at the way this light flares across the archer's face, and causes your sword to gleam.

Three eyes are better than one. Shame about the lack of opposable thumbs.

Oblivion will include native fauna, like this... fawn. We're already eyeing-up the skinning opportunities.

Don't fancy spending your life exploring *Oblivion*? You can always take a minor tour.

The unwelcoming sneer alerts us that this NPC is Elvish. Or has gas.



Bar fights will be exponentially more interesting when you can bottle the drunk with a physics object.

MORRO-MORE

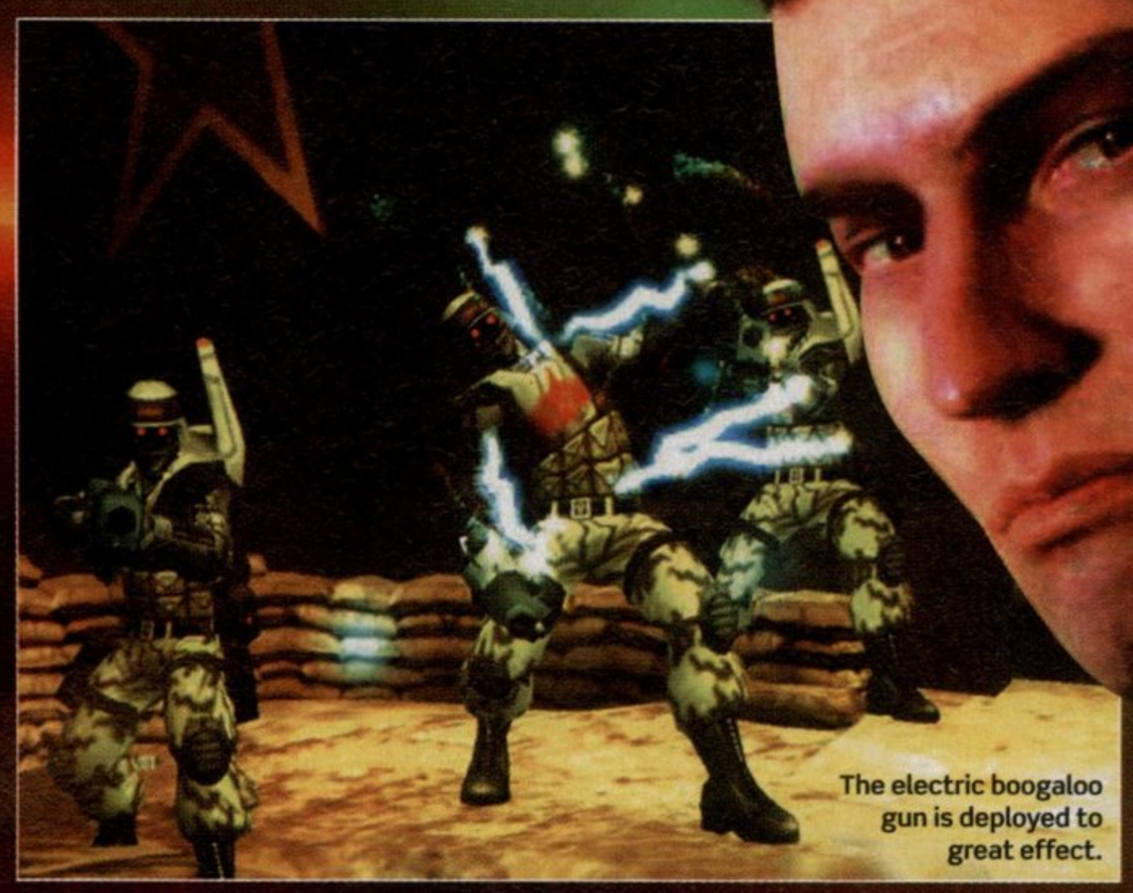
Caves in *Morrowind* provided reasons to explore – the best loot was always found underground. Tradition dictates that *Elder Scrolls IV* must include similar subterranean sorties.

BOW DOWN

In the previous *Elder Scrolls* game, crossbows became virtual sniper rifles at high levels. For *Oblivion*, Bethesda are ditching them in favour of the more traditional long and short bow.

GILDED

The level of graphical detail displayed is truly remarkable. *Oblivion* is beautiful – check out the gorgeous bump-mapping on the handle of this golden sword. It seems a shame to get it dirty.


The electric boogaloo gun is deployed to great effect.

Heart on sleeve, body full of wires

RELEASE MARCH

Project Snowblind

Solid. It's damn near insulting to describe a game as "solid" nowadays. As opinions generally lodge themselves in the polar extremes, setting your stall somewhere in the tropics is seen as not having tried hard enough, or just plain pointless. But wipe that prejudice from your mind as your eyes caress this preview. *Project Snowblind*'s main pull is its solidity. It is rugged. Manly.

Which feels about right, because you're a cyborg; a soldier that's brought back from the brink of death, Robocop-style, with a catalogue full of gadgets and enhancements glued into his body. The enhancements have multiple functions, from scanning the nearby area and picking out your friends from foes to pure boosts of power and adrenaline that slows your surroundings down to a crawl.

It all serves to accentuate the action that swarms across the Asian vistas of *Snowblind*'s settings. What it lacks in subtlety, the game makes up for in oomph.

> Spider bots, deployable walls and a physics gun

The coalition that has provided the augmentations is in the middle of a bloody battle with a terrorist warlord, who seems to have an unlimited supply of cannon fodder. The first level you're thrown into sees chunks of cars thrown through compound walls, robot attacks and a helicopter bombing you with all its might, mixed in with a never-ending siege from the warlord's minions.

It is, to put it mildly, bonkers. And that insane spirit streaks through the weapons as well. Spider bots, deployable walls, and a physics gun that propels the loose objects in its path with tremendous force.

Linear it may be, but its *Deus Ex*-esque combo of weaponry and augmentations should make it a decent blast.

CRAIG PEARSON

README

Publisher Eidos
Developer Crystal Dynamics
Link www.projectsnowblind.com
The game that goes where *Deus Ex* dare not tread. No, not Mount Druitt.

THE PITCH

Cyber-pumped, FPS troopers flex their boosted muscles in the battle against terrorism.

"Will someone take that street sign off my helmet!"

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Crates decided it was time for action.

Black is always in fashion

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

RELEASE MARCH

ON THE DVD Sneak in some time with the stunning single player level on the disc > Demos

THE PITCH
More of the same sneaking, but with more oomph – not least in the innovative multiplayer.

Confusing level design, uncooperative AI, perplexing security systems… Attempting to leave Ubisoft's Montreal headquarters without permission is a major test, and an insight into the inspiration behind *Splinter Cell*. One can only imagine the carnage had I been able to sticky-shocker the receptionist and headlock a texture artist into blabbing the goddamn codes for the door. And yet it was cold enough, once finally at extraction, to freeze swearwords in my mouth. So I wanted to go back in; clearly, staying indoors making videogames was the only option for these guys.

Indoors and bereft of real weapons they've been working hard, particularly on making *Splinter Cell*'s co-op multiplayer one of the few examples truly worthy of the name. Teamwork in *Chaos Theory* is vital: some things are impossible alone. One player-spy can give another a boost to an otherwise unreachable ledge, for instance, then climb up his legs (ignoring regular trouser strength) to the new level. You can also propel the other like a human cannonball over large gaps, act as a decoy distraction or, if it all goes completely Falluja, heal a downed colleague. Objectives also require things like simultaneous switch-flipping, so communication is key and a headset vital to success.

> If it all goes completely Falluja, heal a colleague

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the shadows – where are you?"

"I am in the shadows also."

And so on.

Co-op missions pit players against the AI, but in dedicated maps rather than – as is often the case – the story mode. We can only applaud such specialisation. If it is possible to play a mission alone, then why on earth would you want to play it as a team? ▶

Move along sir, there's nothing to see here.

"Look! A shooting star!"

Ragdoll effects mean comedy falling deaths galore.

City-based levels even include a bank robbery.

Meanwhile, real nerd-on-nerd violence is serviced once again with the impressive Versus mode, which pits third-person view, non-lethal spies against first-person, heavily tooled-up mercenaries. While there are plenty of new gadgets and weapons, Ubisoft is working hard at making sure no single ability dominates. Not even invisibility… yes, spies now have a Predator-style 'cloaking' device, which you might think would be hard to balance out. But it only works for a limited time, shuts down if you run and actually makes you look like a man-shaped glass of vodka rather than nothing at all.

It's all like this: mercenaries can hook into the camera network, for instance, but it leaves them immobile and vulnerable; spies can track them with heartbeat monitors, but mercs have new 'spin attacks' for when they sense somebody close; spies have tear gas but mercs have (limited-use) gasmasks; mercs have poison mines but spies can heal each other… the list goes on.

For more basic cat and mouse action there's the unfortunately-named Disc Hunt (say it quickly) which involves collecting a subset of 12 discs. However, getting slotted means you lose them all, so it should be tense: indeed, as Shakespeare observed: now is the Splinter of our Disc Hunt tense… ah, sorry. The ability to completely derange levels with machinery, such as a huge digger that just needs triggering to smash the walls and bring walkways tumbling will also help keep things fresh. Time for a couple more numbers: multiplayer offers six new maps and five enhanced versions of *Pandora Tomorrow* favourites. How we all love numbers.

But we don't love losing control. The continued evolution of Versus mode means several fixes, such as mercenaries no longer being able to restock equipment with tactical suicides; loadouts are limited per bout. Players can also be matched according to time spent online, while extensive 'rules' options also make it possible to tailor out any abilities that you particularly dislike, from vision modes to weapons.

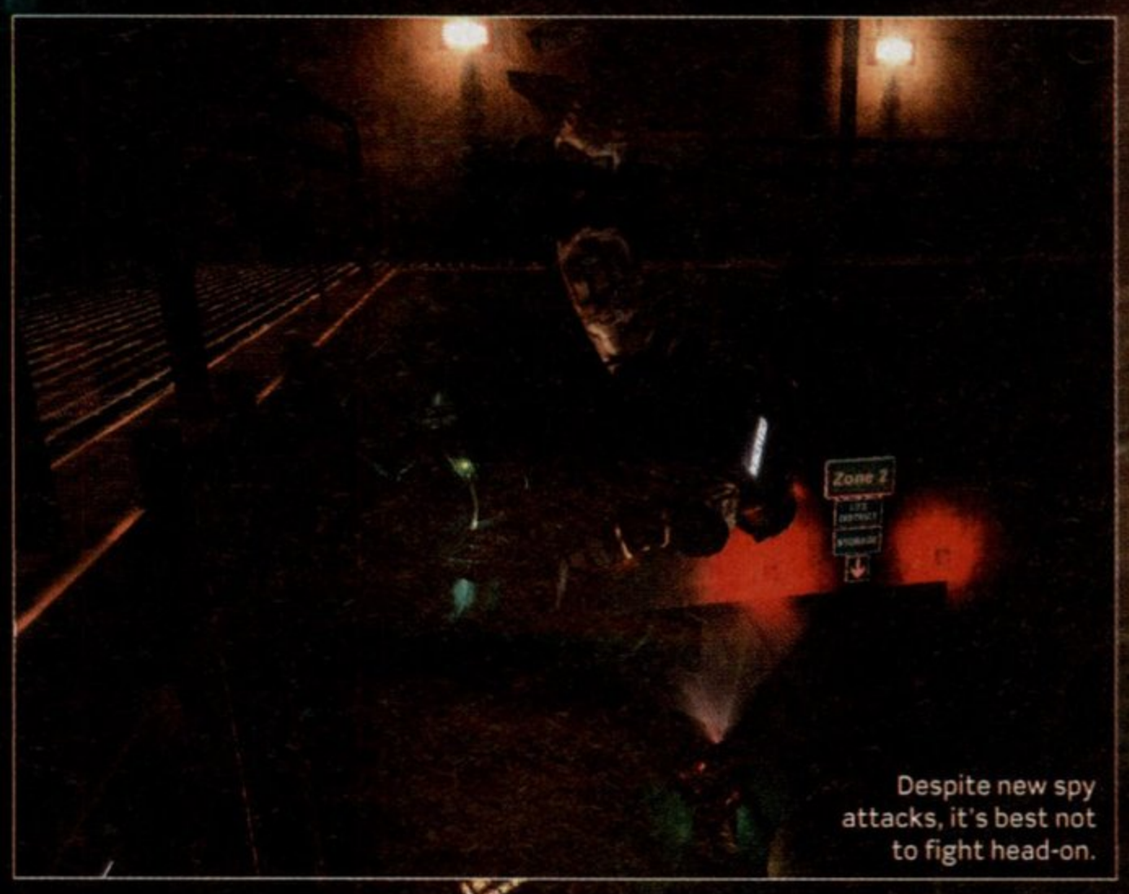
Of course, singleplayer has not escaped the overhaul. Fat Sam, so weary and close to retirement in the original, appears to be getting younger. Where previously he was all about surprise attacks or complete avoidance, he's now happy with face-to-face combat – a knee to the groin, a knife in the guts, a punch in the eye. It's certainly fun (and negates the frustrating last-second turn of some seemingly psychic guards) but could potentially alter the dynamic from exploiting our own character's weaknesses to exploiting the enemy's. And that, of course, is action rather than stealth. The counter-balance is tidily incorporated – killing the wrong people makes missions tougher. Interrogation may reveal vital information, while creating a corpse may make additional objectives, or lengthy searches, necessary instead.

> A knife in the guts, a punch in the eye

Lead level designer and script writer, Clint Hocking, insists the action mirrors the story's theme: chaos theory, the idea that small decisions cascade into large consequences. Do you leave a generator running to cover your footsteps (a sound meter joins the stealth bar) and step under the lights they power? Do you switch it off, hide in the dark and try to remain silent? Or do you stab the fuel tank and run to a better position before it fails? Though it's no *Deus Ex*, levels now feature multiple paths, and Hocking insists the entire game (bar one encounter still under testing) can be completed without killing anyone, despite Sam's new strengths. How worthwhile that effort feels will be a measure of *Chaos Theory*'s success.

Some changes are major yet feel subtle. Alarms still have four stages but you won't fail for setting off too many; and as a result you can save anywhere. The AI has been re-written to allow for the ragdolling *Havok2* physics, but it's still very *Splinter Cell* (though with 6,000-plus verbal reactions, not so homogenous). Reworked rendering techniques have led to truly gorgeous visuals, though again the style is instantly recognisable, and what could just have been vacuous sexiness has been expoited: moonlight makes one side of a tanker more dangerous than the other, for instance, while water features are useful for drowning people. Or electrocuting them. Just like in real life, eh?

STEVE WILLIAMS



Despite new spy attacks, it's best not to fight head-on.

README

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house
Link www.splintercell.com
A now far-deadlier Sam Fisher lurks in shadows as pretty as a summer's day.

The happy couple re-imagine THAT scene from Titanic.

Stealth suits: amazingly ostentatious.

"If you just used the lift, Sam, maybe you wouldn't be late every day."

Diablo 3D by someone besides Blizzard?

Dungeon Lords

"Careful, it's exposing its armpiits! Flee!"

It could be a haven of retail therapy and wenching... Or it could be a deathtrap

RELEASE APRIL

THE PITCH
Think the 3D fantasy action-adventure classic *Severance*, with RPG stats and stuff.

With the RPG quite evidently thriving once more, it's inevitable that we'll see a few games that try to work in distinctly un-RPG like elements into the typical progressive sword and sorcery adventure template. *Dungeon Lords* is one such game, though it appears to stay true in the areas where it matters.

The build PCGA ventured into was clearly labeled as a work in progress, but at this point it's clear that unless Heuristic Park perform minor miracles to inject a whole mess of charm and character, *Dungeon Lords* is going to be ones for those who love the process. The process of course of developing a whelp into a walloping warrior of epic proportions, in a reasonably non-linear way as you can have without having a conclusive end to an overall story.

Think 'lone chosen one' starts epic adventure by a campfire with a messenger bearing the first lead into the game. Rather a stripped back beginning, but it led straight into a formula that was like the quite classic *Severance*, a gorgeous 3D fantasy dungeon-bustin' action-adventure. However, a huge amount of the character development traits and interactive towns and people make *Dungeon Lords* more of a RPG with a pulse.

With the exception of larger foes, enemies always arrive in groups

A combat system that at first felt incredibly awkward and lacking soon became more than adequate once we developed a feel for the hit collision. Melee combat controls are fairly simplistic, with the four basic directions selecting the swing-type of melee weapons, and basic combos forming intuitively.

Faced with multiple enemies, it soon becomes obvious that *Dungeon Lords* plays like '*Diablo 3D*' with manual combat thrown in. Despite good timing helping a bit, victory in *Dungeon Lords* is more about managing the use of powers than having acute reflexes.

This could shape up to be *Diablo* in 3D

It's also about being observant, as it wasn't long until PCGA entered a battle where unusual elements in the action and the environment had to be spotted, and recognised as a piece of a puzzle.

Unfortunately, access to full weapons and armour from the outset made gauging how tough the game is looking very hard. What it wasn't hard to tell was that the settings and those that inhabit them look quite impressive. The game ran well, and while we saw nothing jaw dropping, with a little polish on the interface and animation, fantasy gamers could have a winner here.

Xxxxxxxx.

Ye olde teleport station

Multiplayer looked to work much like *Diablo* as well, with the same basic game playing host to a group of characters playing via LAN or the Internet. If the final polish can end up matching the versatility of this game, this could shape up to be *Diablo* in 3D, what many have been waiting for.

DAN TOOSE

README

Publisher Typhoon Games
Developer Heuristic Park
Link www.dungeonlordsgame.com
An action-RPG that can combine the two genres well, if it manages a little more charm.

Shhh. Listen. Hear that? No? *Exactly*

Stolen

RELEASE AUTUMN

THE PITCH

If *Metal Gear Solid* had been designed by a woman, it would look and play like this.

How fitting that *Stolen*'s been ghosting almost unnoticed through the PC gaming community, given that it's a quiet, understated game about breaking and entering. Fitting, but a little unjust. Starring poster-idol-in-waiting Anya Romanov as a jewel thief caught in some kind of (yet-to-be-revealed) Machiavellian political conflict, it looks to be one of the cuter games coming out next year. No killing, no cussing, no desperate ploys for adult attention; just stealth.

A stealth game where the lead character is a lumbering, belching, 18-stone couch potato would be interesting, but over very quickly, which is probably why Blue 52 chose to make Anya a delicate, sweet, sylph-like acrobat. Half of the game is about moving her around across that cityscape, and inside the twisted buildings that make up the near-future industrial environment. Control is partly context-sensitive – see a pipe, for example, and it's likely you can shimmy up it, or use it to flip to another part of the level – but mostly based on a consistent skillset that turns each location into a three dimensional maze. Remember just how good the first *Tomb Raider* felt when you were twisting and bounding your way into new territory? It felt like being an explorer, and that's partly the feeling the developers manage to prompt here.

> Remember how good *Tomb Raider* felt?

The other thread in *Stolen's* urban tapestry involves evading guards. There's a map of the local area, similar to the on-screen display in *Metal Gear Solid*, but Snake has it easier than Anya. Before guards become visible on the digital display, Anya must tag them with sensors fired from an air pistol. It means you've actually got to spot the guards before you can avoid them, and that means using our heroine's supple skills to get her to a decent vantage point. It's an elegant way of relating the map to the real world.

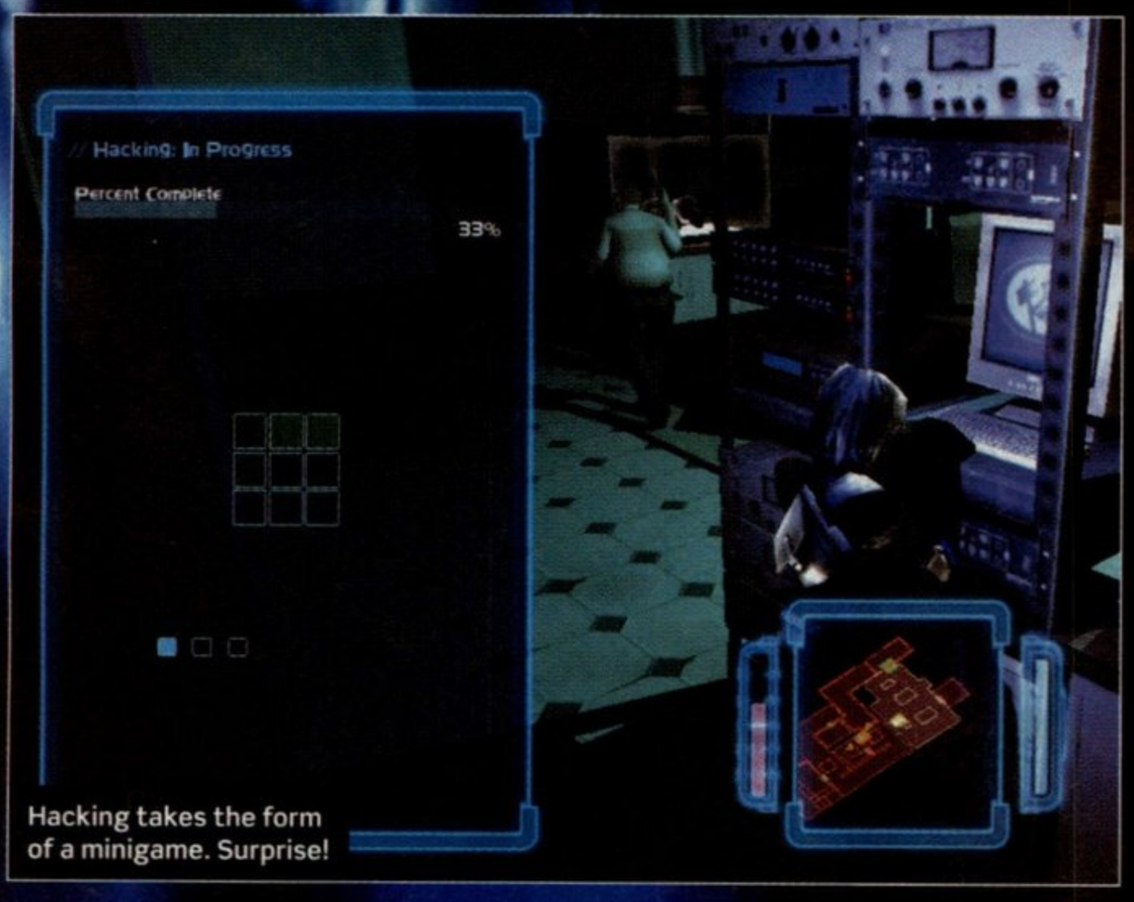
There are other toys, too, non-lethal gizmos that give Anya some edge over the variously inquisitive enemies that block her way. The most visually impressive of these is the sonar vision, which not only helps to detect guards in another room, but also reveals the shape of the room itself. Footfalls from patrols send out waves in beats, illuminating the structure's shape in spectacular white scratchmarks, but no noise means no soundwaves, and – unless she can coerce the guards into moving – Anya will have to seek another way to stay ahead of the game.

It's no surprise that Blue 52 provide that now familiar promise of multiple solutions to every puzzle, and the presence of neat, addictive hacking minigames is hardly a shock, either. Then again, *Stolen* doesn't intend to show off new videogame dynamics, just refine old forgotten thrills and give them a fresh, attractive, non-combative sheen. And without meaning to sound *totally* effeminate, there's a delicacy here that's totally charming. You know, so many PC games bludgeon, bruise, and brutalise their way into your heart. It's kind of nice that, just for once, *Stolen* kisses.

STE CURRAN

README

Publisher Hip Interactive
Developer Blue 52
Link www.blue52.co.uk/stolen/stolen.htm
Not for Clancy-obsessed gun nerds, but open minded gamers really ought to steal a look.



Hacking takes the form of a minigame. Surprise!

(Sigh) Anya's stolen our hearts already.

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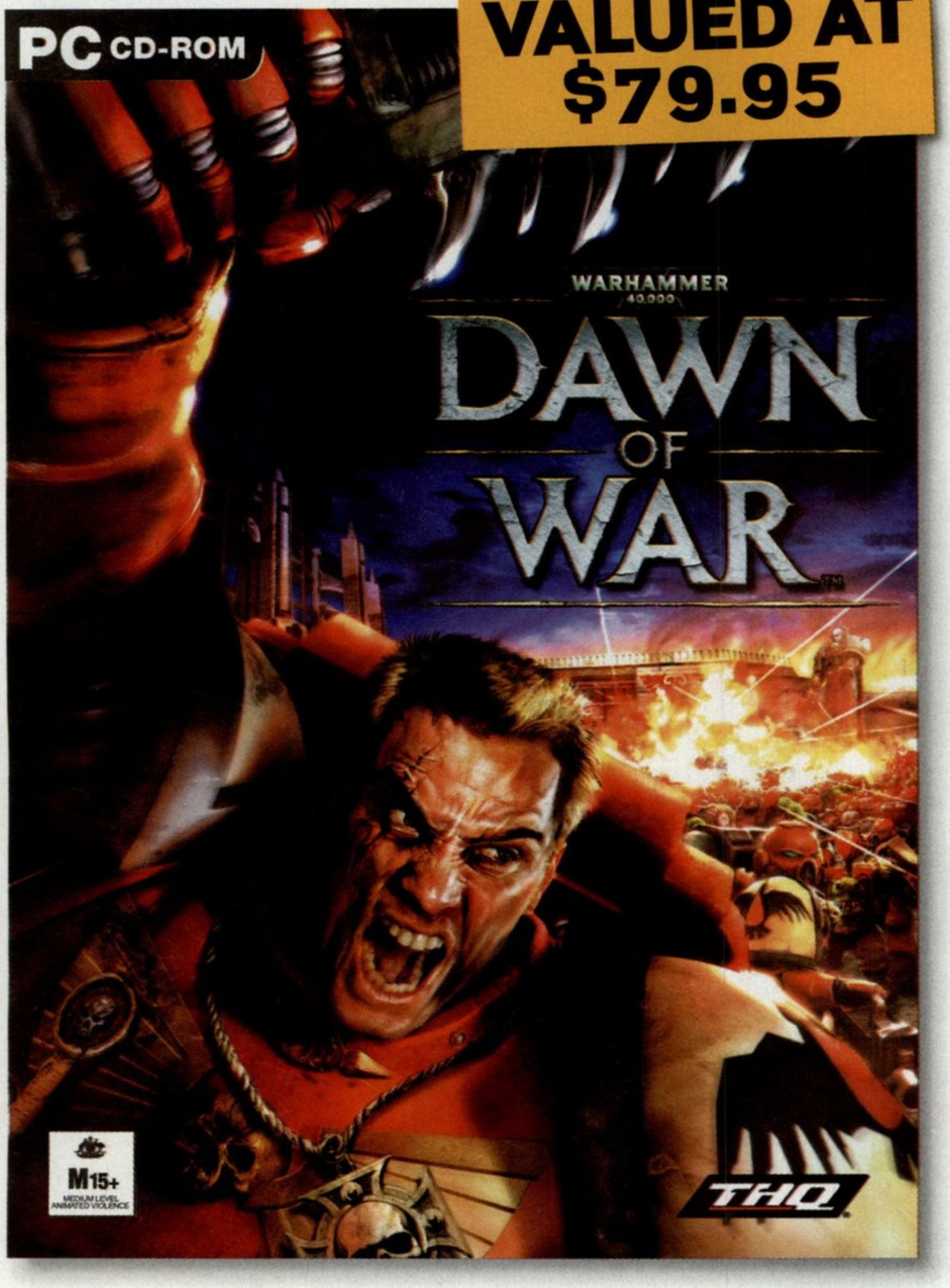

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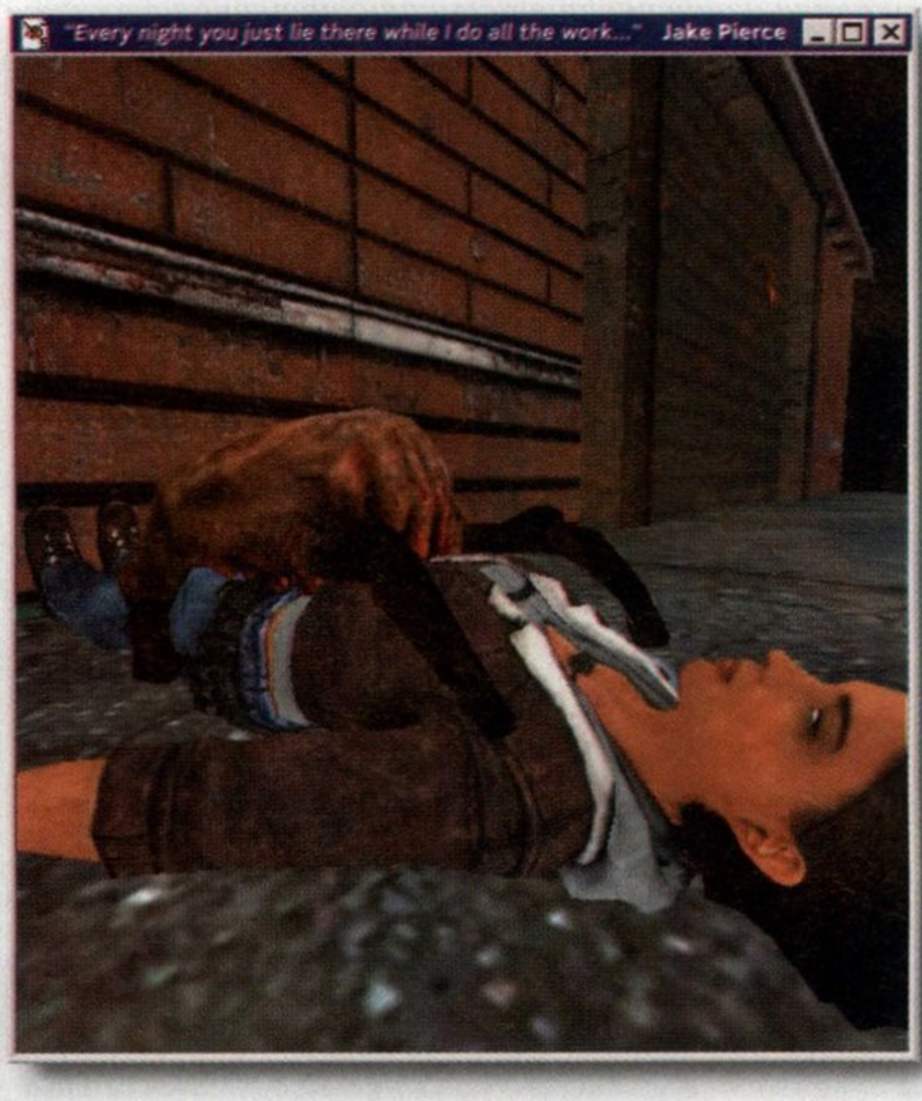
Gamer Snap

Gas-masked guard abuse? It's a *HL2* special...

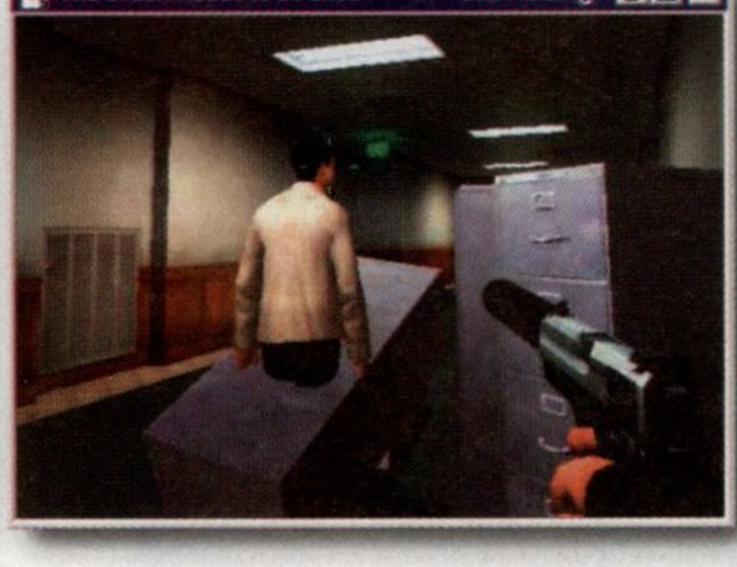
"DON'T SHOOT! That Giant Puft will cream all over us..." Stephen McCarrey

"Every night you just lie there while I do all the work..." Jake Pierce

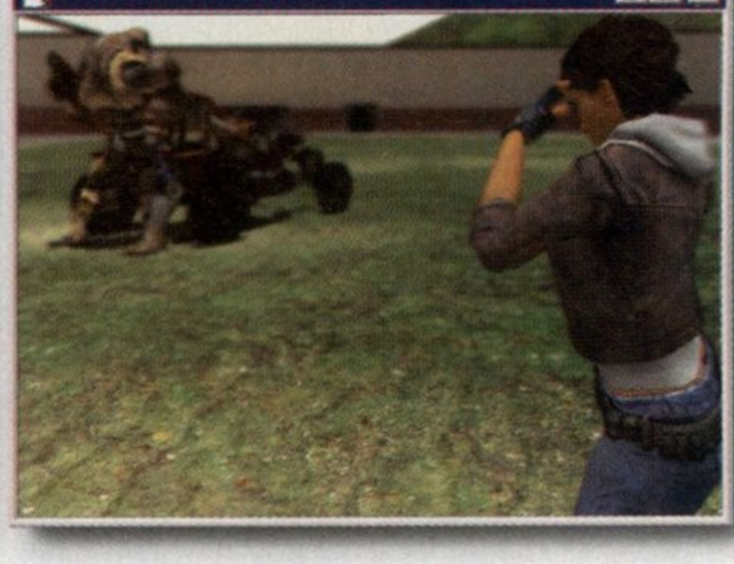


Post HL2 depression hits home... James Wheeler

File under: About to be Shot. Jon Malsingh

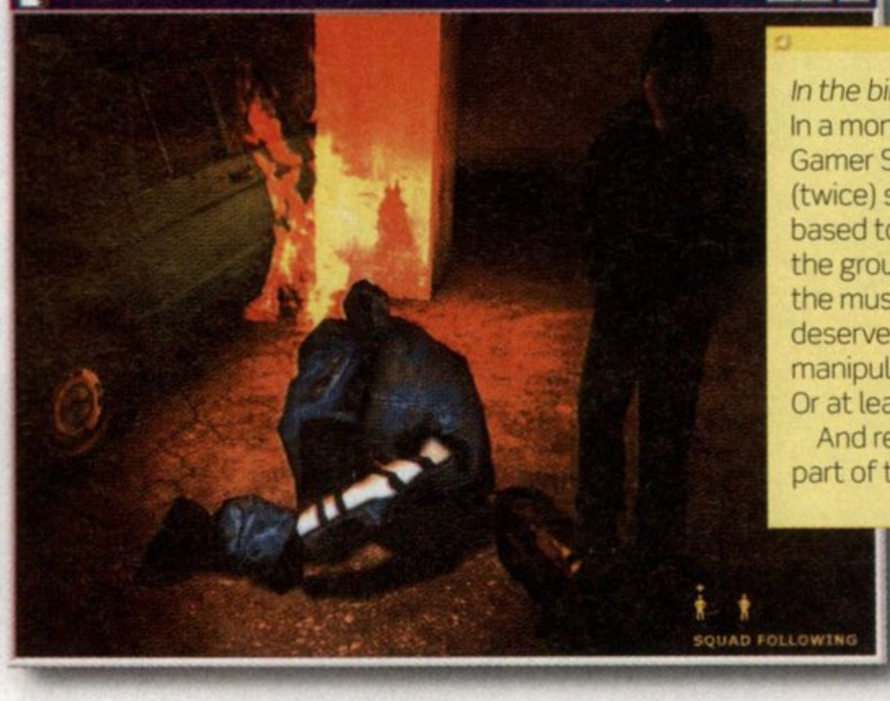


"Bad DOG... That's a bad DOG!" Tim Oliver



New Transformers foe asks, "D'y know what I am yet?" J Roberts

Untitled Simple Alec



In the bin this month, as voted by Art...
In a month of real excellence, when Art's Gamer Snap email inbox literally broke (twice) such was the volume of City 17 based tomfoolery, the old 'head buried in the ground' shenanigans just don't cut the mustard. The PC's greatest game deserves the most ambitious photo-manipulations by your crazed selves, ever. Or at least high-brow knob gags.

And remember folks, your caption *is* part of the judging process.

Wastebasket

CREATIVE

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PlayStation 2

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Cables

Illustrations by **David Lyttleton**

Featuring: Graphics over gameplay & slave labour

SHORTS

Are there any cheats for *World of Warcraft* you can pass on?
Anon, email
Uh, no. People caught cheating in MMORPGs are generally banned. Best we don't help that happen eh? **PCGA**

I want the best *WarCraft 3* cheats in the world.
Ben Jooste, email
What is it with you lot? Log onto Blizzard.net and start a multiplayer game. They'll come and find you. **PCGA**

These violent games, are changing me. Sense of morality fading. I'm – GAAARGH! MUST KILL!
DRAXUS, email
Oh for god sakes - don't joke. Yeah, we get it, you get it, and your mates get it - but those old conservative types who write to the attorney general don't get it, they think you mean it. **PCGA**

Do looks matter Gords?

Read: books

I'm currently writing my degree dissertation about the 'Form over function' debate – the idea that modern games pursue better graphics at the cost of better gameplay. However since the industry is so young there are very few 'academic' sources (read: books). I do have a few good bits to quote from you guys, however opinions from recognised and knowledgeable sources are still pretty thin on the ground.

The main area I'm looking at, is people claiming games like *Dune 2, Doom, Populous, Elite, Civ, Half-Life,* etc were far more fun to play, and more creative and original than games like *Unreal 2, Enter the Matrix, Master of Orion 3* and *Far Cry*, which pursued better graphics to the detriment of gameplay. Finally I've also got to consider that we may have 'turned the corner' with games like *Half-Life 2, KOTOR* delivering amazing graphics, and quality and fun gameplay.
Tim John, email

Good question. It comes down to fidelity. Do increased resolutions, clearer textures, and anti-aliased characters create a richer playing experience? Solitaire *is still solitaire even if you paste a 3D engine over the top.* Everquest 2 *doesn't do much that couldn't be achieved in an MMO five years ago, bump maps or no bump maps. But the visual design of* Half-Life 2, *down to the wrinkles in Dr Kleiner's face, creates the illusion of a world at war. A short answer? Maybe. Good luck with the dissertation.* **PCGA**

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Battered Fiesta

I read your article in PCGA 30 on developer working hours with interest, as I work in software development myself. Your article while being spot-on, omitted the testers. Beta testing carries with it all of the hours, stresses and pizza of programming, but none of the salary. Developers can earn a fortune, while testers earn a very limiting salary.

I see the issue from company perspective, too though. Any project must have a finite development time and no computer programme is ever released without a few bugs. Unfortunately the nature of testing seems to be that showstoppers only appear when there is less than a week to go before code-freeze. Your release must be successful in order to validate the money spent on it, if not then your teams may become jobless (and developers find new positions more easily than testers). As a result, you must ensure that all steps are taken to release a fully functioning programme that lives up to the project brief.

So, next time you visit a software house look past the developers' Mercedes in the car park to the battered bomb in the corner, the one driven by the guy with the thousand-yard stare and tomato sauce stains on his top, and pity the poor testers.
Anonymous, email

We're often given tours of development studios and there's a common thread to these events: at the end of the day, a nervous rep will open a door, shine a torch into a pit of human flesh then say "and these are the testers." The door's always slammed shut before we get to talk to them. If you're a tester in the games industry, drop us a line and tell us about your job. **PCGA**

Got guild?

After reading in Dan's editorial that he was playing on the Lightbringer server in *World of Warcraft*, it dawned on me that maybe he'd found a good guild to join. I'm in a decent guild on another server, but wanted to see if I could join his, as I expect he'd only join one that kicks ass. And what's his handle?
Azeroth Addict, email

My (yes it's Dan - Ed) Night Elf hunter is called Cheshire, but he's not in a guild, despite being level 40+. Nor is he likely to be in another guild any time soon after finding the last four he joined to be lacking. The problem I'm finding is that guilds feel a pressure to let lots of people in to 'compete', and they end up being full of people you otherwise wouldn't ally with. Please start a good one! **PCGA**

ATARI

The best letter of the month wins a bundle of great games from Atari's 'Heroes' range. Send your rants, ravings and reactions to **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au** with "CABLES" as the subject. Long or vulgar letters may be edited to fit or toned down accordingly...

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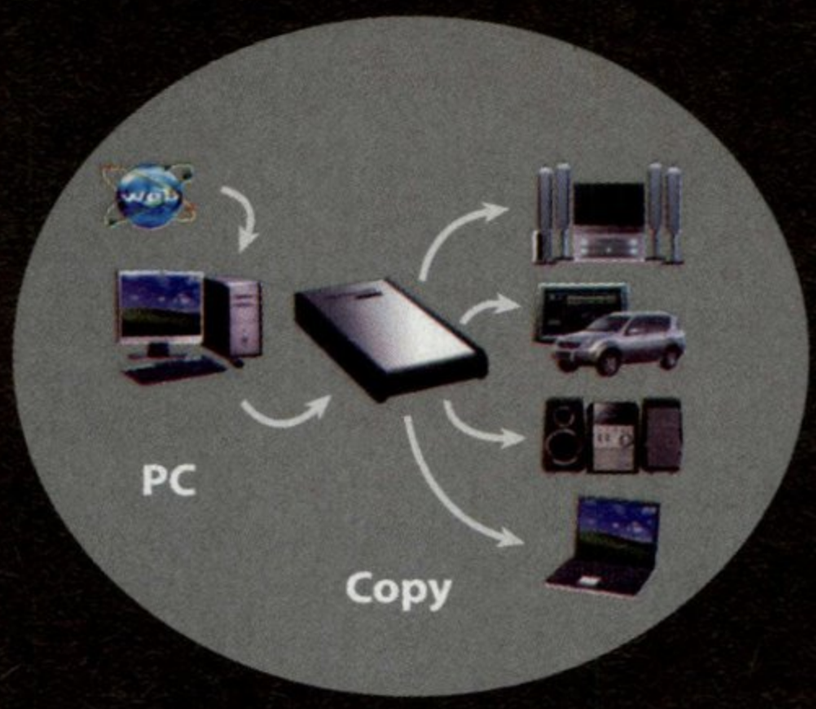

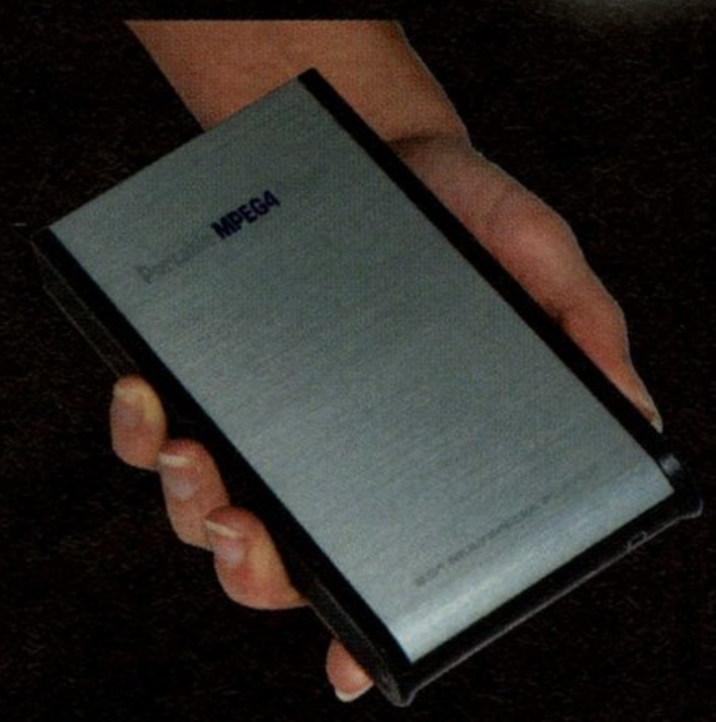

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- Stefan Halley, Hero Realm

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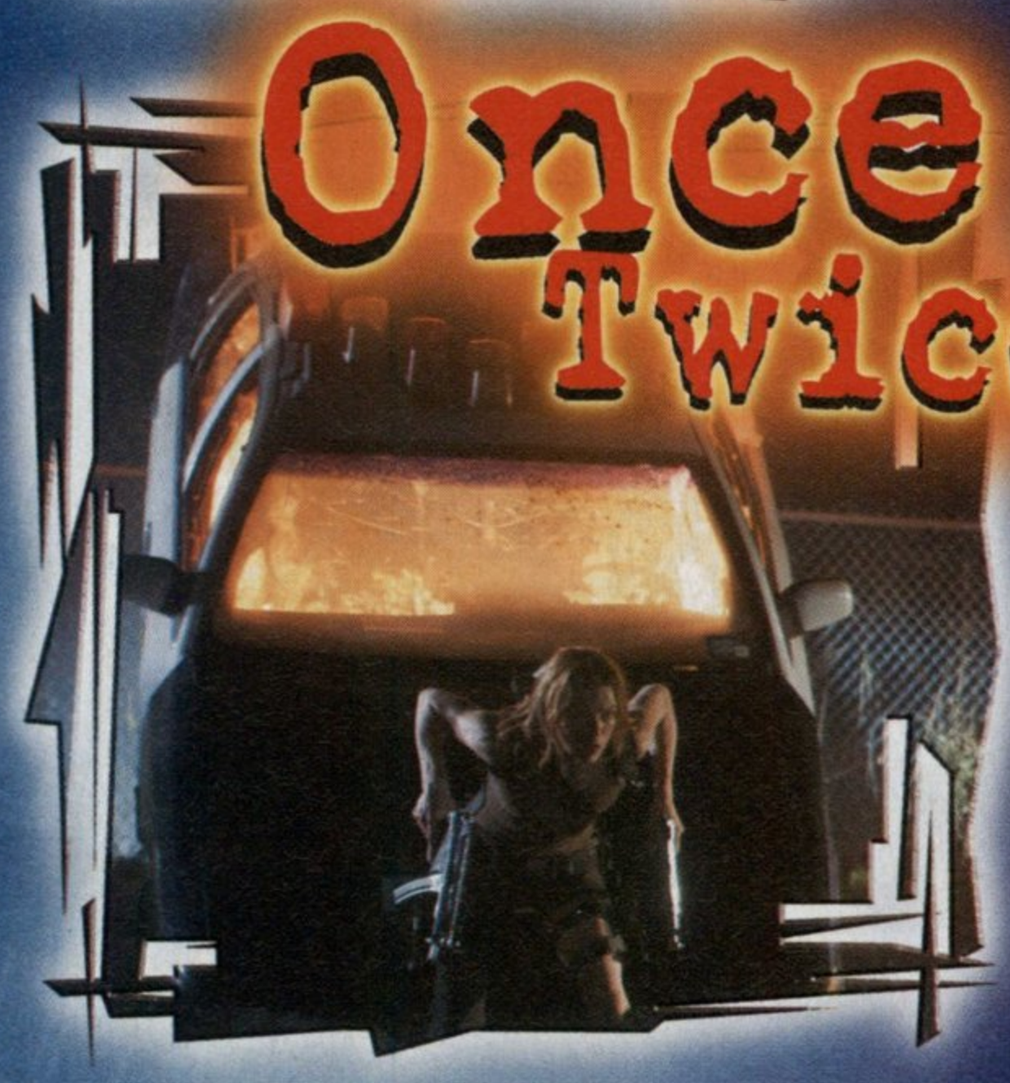

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PC GAMES ADDICT

REVIEWS

In which we put the new releases before our panel of PC gaming experts

Few surprises...

Is that why the oddball games stand out?

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so hard on February's release schedule last issue, labelling it as a quiet period was to ignore the imminent arrival of *Knights of the Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords*. Perhaps a little bit of that had to do with my own personal expectation of 'more of the same', which always sounds horribly negative, but when a game that receives so much praise and attention gets a sequel, there's rarely major innovation. The result was predicatble, a great game that improves on the original, but makes less of an impression.

The top scoring game this month is actually *Darwinia*, something that will probably confuse some of you. I say this because I'm aware of my own penchant for things that remind me of the pioneering years of gaming, and the bizarre stylings of Introversion's oddball RTS game are a classic example of a title that truly pays homage. Even if you don't share our love of the years when pastel wasn't considered a crime against fashion, *Darwinia* is one of those games that effortlessly proves how solid its gameplay is by using such simplistic visuals. It does more with less.

Finally, while we weren't prepared to make the call until we had our hands on the world exclusive review code, it was less of a surprise to us that *Act of War* succeeded in raising the bar on the 'WWIII' modern day RTS genre. *C&C Generals* is still a good game, but it's aging, and it'd be a very sad thing indeed for PC gaming if for all the releases that we see each year, we didn't see at least some sort of improvement going on in the biggest genres of all.

Don't expect progress… Demand it!

DAN TOOSE
EDITOR

Scrutinised this issue...

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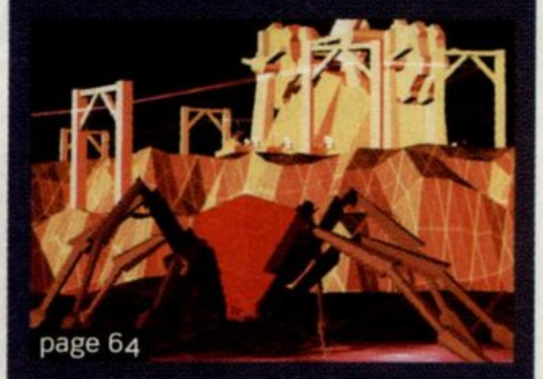
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The PCGA review rig

There's no point reviewing new games on old PCs, otherwise we wouldn't be doing them justice. After all, how can you tell how well a game runs until you've seen it on the best machine available?

That's why we've turned to Emagen. Not just because they're able to keep working with an up to date PC to put the games through their paces, but also due to the fact that we're certain that they do the best system assembly in the business. Look at the picture below and you won't find a stray ATA cable or screw out of place. If you're serious about assembling the best machine you can, you'd do well to contact Emagen.

THE PC GAMES ADDICT REVIEW MACHINE:

- AMD Athlon XP 3000+
- Asus A7N8X Deluxe
- Corsair TWINX 512MB PC3200
- 128MB Radeon 9800 Pro
- Creative T7700 7.1 Speakers
- 19" Mitsubishi Flat CRT Monitor
- Western Digital WD800JB HDD
- 16X DVD, 52x24x52 CDRW
- Antec LanBoy Chassis
- Mitsubishi 104Key Black Keyboard

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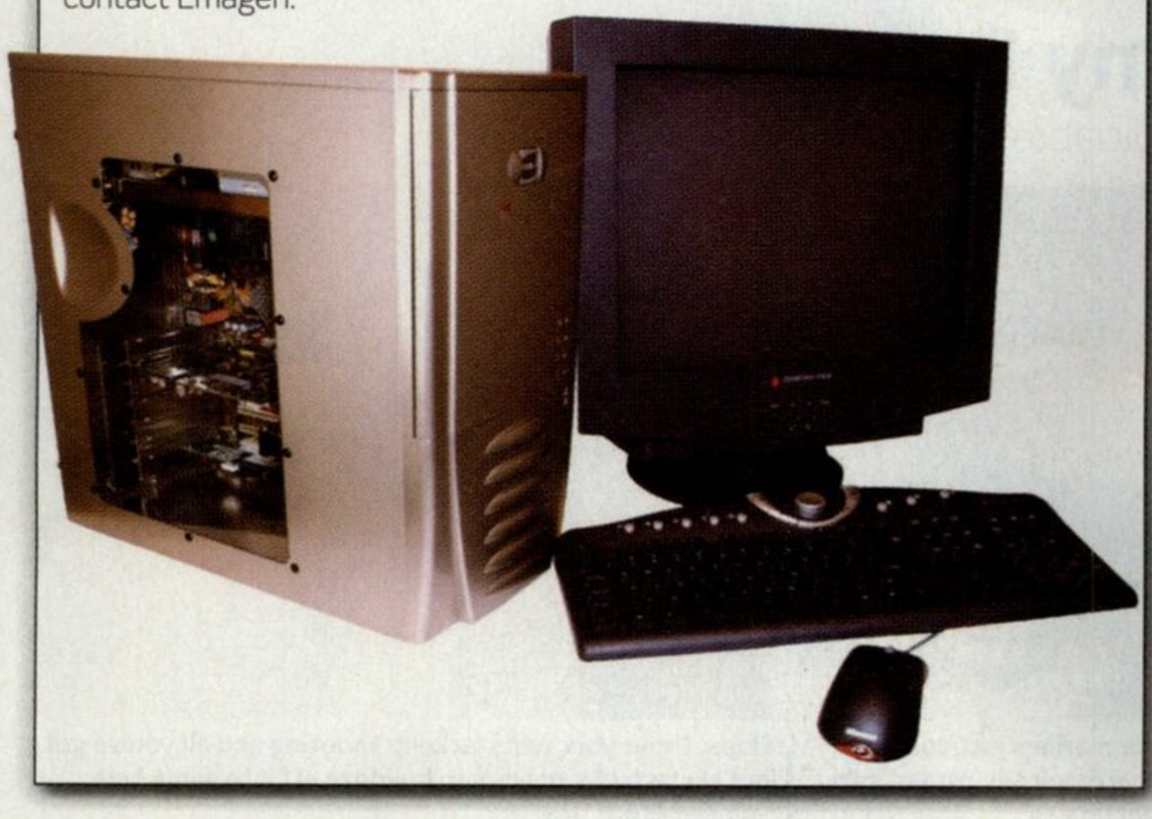


Our Scoring System Explained

0-19% ABOMINABLE
Game crime. If you see this game do not approach. Call the appropriate authorities and have it removed.

20-49% POOR
A deeply troubled and troubling effort. Think twice, even if you find it lurking in the bargain bin.

50-69% MEDIOCRE
Fans of the theme or genre can extract limited fun if they persevere. Otherwise, put your wallet away.

70-84% GOOD
Consistently enjoyable but lacks that spark of genius. Superior alternatives are usually available.

85-89% EXCELLENT
A first-class title that guarantees great gaming. Fans of the genre will revel in it.

90%+ EXCEPTIONAL
Instant classic. These games are worth trying even if you don't normally like the genre.

THE PCGA AWARD

Just as our scoring system implies, if it gets 85% or higher, it's a game worthy of your hard earned dollar. Our **GOLD GAME** award willhelp you spot games **PCGA** recommend.

PC GAMES GOLD GAME

RIGHT TO REPLY

Think we've treated a game unfairly? Or perhaps we've gone too easy on a game. Address your redress to **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au** or write to us via snail mail by sending your correspondence to **Feedback, PC Games Addict, Derwent Howard, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355**

ACT OF WAR: DIRECT ACTION

It's all about the Black Gold, Texas Tea...

Thumbnail Review

A near-future WWIII scenario with a glitzy CNN-style outlook

- [x] Oil fields
- [x] Stealth Bombers
- [x] The President
- [x] al-Jazeera

It's flashy, it's modern, and has enough style and substance to win over the C&C faithful for an engagement or two.

PRICE OF WAR

It's Time To Make Your Enemy Pay

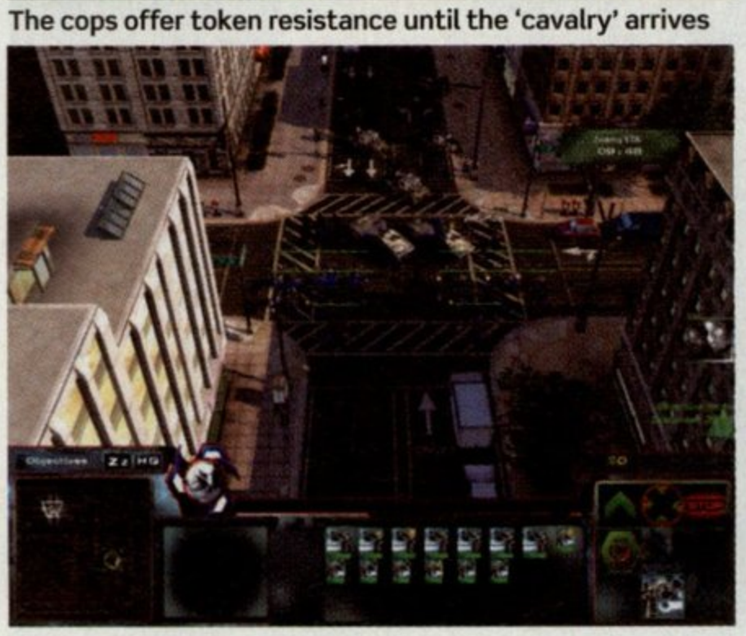
Fighting terrorism isn't cheap; and prisoners can be very valuable

Don't shoot! If enemy infantry are wounded, they'll drop to their knees and surrender. It would be wise to save your bullets for targets that'll fire back at you.

See the floating dollar signs? Our marines just cuffed those dirty terrorists, and they've magically turned into coins for the war chest. Cash matters.

Oops. Order your units to keep shooting and all you've got are a bunch of cadavers to bulldoze off into some hole somewhere...

The cops offer token resistance until the 'cavalry' arrives



Hind-E vs. Commanche, a classic military showdown is there

If you're grumbling about the price of petrol now, just wait until the oil crisis is as bad as the one presented in *Act of War: Direct Action*. Popping into your local gas station to "fill 'er up" could soon be the price of a brand new PC game; and we wouldn't want that now would we? The depressing thing about this future scenario of a global oil crisis forcing pump prices up to 7 US dollars a gallon is that the world is rapidly heading towards that very reality. RTS games usually like to deal with Earth-invading aliens, or futuristic technology that's too far-fetched to ever gnaw away at the back of your mind, but *Act of War* isn't afraid to plonk us right into a very believable scenario. Terrorism is rampant, the oil industry is a big target, and the USA is at the very heart of it all.

This tale comes to us from the brain of techno-thriller author Dale Brown. Apparently he writes those Tom Clancy style novels and is quite a popular chap with readers who love a bit of espionage in the evenings. *Act of War: Direct Action* is even going to be released this year as a full novel, so this is a game built upon solid foundations indeed.

To enhance the professionally handled narrative, French developer Eugen even opted to bring back live-action cutscenes to help add oomph to the proceedings. Whilst it's nice to see this kind of ambitious presentation return to the RTS genre, the end result is a bit of a mixed bag. You can partly blame the wooden acting, but to be honest, when the overly-patriotic heroes dispense their final lines of cheesy dialogue it's obvious that for all its pretensions at being a mature "techno-thriller", Act of War is still a train-wreck of clichés.

Accurate shadows in a RTS game with units this small is very impressive

Act of War just keeps getting better...

Whereas the story and quality of FMV start out well but end badly, the gameplay in *Act of War* just keeps getting better and better. When your single-player Operation ends, you'll feel like you've only just warmed up. And because we all know that the real life-blood of any good RTS is its longevity as a multiplayer game, you'll realise you've been warmed up for a very good reason.

The single-player Operation mode puts you in charge of a combination of two of the game's playable sides – the US Army and Task Force TALON. Your enemy is the third playable side, the elusive Consortium, a group that seems to be funding extremely professional terrorist groups that have been striking the USA on home soil and causing global chaos. Most of the units on hand are for the most part what you'd expect from a modern military RTS: various types of infantry including snipers and heavy-weapons guys, a range of heavy and light tanks with various APC style vehicles in-between, air units that range from stealthy Comanches to the Medevac that can heal infantry within a radius, and the more powerful aircraft that are called in from an Air Strike hot-key rather than being individually controlled units on the map. But *Act of War* also flirts with more futuristic tech, such as TALON's SHIELD unit - a robotic exoskeleton that gives infantry incredible firepower and resistance to all sorts of attack. It can switch between a soldier-chewing mini-gun and a vehicle-busting rocket-launcher, and can even be healed remotely. Then there are all the other toys, such as expensive long-range "nukes", Spinner tanks that can transform between three different attack modes - including a remotely controlled hovering bomb - and other tasty pieces of serious hardware.

What's impressive is the sense of balance between everything on offer. As deadly as some units may appear, everything in the game has something to counter it. Each unit has very specific strengths and weaknesses (as well as access to some interesting upgrades), resulting in some true Rock/Paper/Scissors style gameplay that is even somehow reminiscent of the addictive *Advance Wars* on ▶

ON THE DISC Not convinced? Bah, check it out for yourself and you'll soon see why it's special > Demos

TAKEN APART

"There's No Place Like Home (Base)..."

CONSTRUCTIVE This Excavator is currently putting the finishing touches on a Light Armour Depot that can produce Fatvees, Bradley Tanks and more. The Excavator can then be set to auto-repair buildings that take damage.

THE CASTLE This is HQ. If this gets destroyed by the enemy, you're pretty much toast. You can generate Drone Constructors and Excavators here that are both crucial to building new tech. You might want to change your DEFCON status too.

THE MAN Jefferson must survive every mission. He's super tough and can even regenerate his health, but sometimes it's easier to just hold him up at base and surround him with tanks! For his own good, of course.

HEALING HELI The UH-60Q Medevac helicopter emits a handy healing radius. If you have injured troops out in the battlefield, just fly her in and set down until your men are fighting fit again.

GBA. It goes beyond the simple reasoning of aircraft dominating ground vehicles, and ground vehicles dominating infantry. The range of units on hand each seem to have an opposing unit that can dispose of them rather easily, ensuring that you don't needlessly rush units into unknown areas. Extra tools such as versatile defense turrets add even more danger to the mix, and unless you can figure out how to knock out your opponent's power supply to render the turrets useless, you just might find yourself up against a seemingly impenetrable defense. Time for some chin stroking.

The urban environments in the game also make further tactics possible: Infantry are able to enter buildings – from bunkers to sniper towers, office blocks and the rooftops of apartment buildings. Once inside they'll be able to shoot at the enemy from any available window and not be individually targeted. As a result, buildings become very tactically advantageous, as even tanks will need to virtually destroy a building in order to dispose of the pesky infantry inside of it. Thankfully, you can send troops in to clear out the enemy inside. Trees in the game can be used as ambush cover, giving any hidden infantry a damage multiplier. Our only real gripe with using cover is that it's frustratingly limited to trees when the gorgeous detail of the game teases us with telephone boxes, concrete barriers, parked cars and so on. It's disappointing that these are nothing more than eye candy when there is such a useful game mechanic built in to the engine. In any case, hiding infantry along tree-lined roads can be effective, and ambushes add more depth to the strategy on offer.

Ambushes add more depth to the strategy

Act of War is a conventional RTS in the sense that base-building is still at the heart of the gameplay, but there's a distinct lack of resource gathering which keeps the experience fresh. It's all about cold, hard cash. You just need maintain a steady flow of funds to keep your war machine rolling, and there are three ways to do this: drilling for oil, taking prisoners of war and our favourite, capturing banks.

The fact that prisoners can earn you cash really has a big impact on the way you play. Once enemy infantry are injured enough they'll drop to their knees and surrender, allowing your troops to capture them. Two enemy soldiers just might earn you the price of a fresh tank, so whilst it's satisfying to nab enemy soldiers, it makes you think twice about needlessly sending infantry to pester your opponent. Your enemy might be making a killing out of it, in more ways than one. Drilling for oil is a more reliable grab for cash. There are always one or two spots on a map that allow you to build an oil derrick and oil refinery which will keep

Three Strikes and You're Out

Call in your flying friends and put to rest those long distance threats

Paint your target area, even if you don't have intel on where the enemy is. There could be tanks in that street!

Roger that...er, Roger. Here comes the old "death from above". We wonder if it's Maverick or Ice Man in there...

Kaboom! Gee, looks like it was only the postman after all. Oh well, better to be safe than sorry!

"Don't shoot! It's my last day before retirement..."

You don't always need tactics, just tanks

Gotta love that bloke, SAM's his name...

the funds ticking over nicely. Usually these are situated at your base, so defending them is easy enough. Lastly, placing infantry inside specially located banks enables you to transfer the limited funds to your own account. You just have to get there first.

This battle for cash plays a much greater role in the game's skirmish mode, as starving your enemy of cash becomes key. Oil derricks dry up, the banks can be cleared out, and you can't rely on POWs alone to keep you up and running. You just may find you've squandered your cash in the wrong way, or your expensive toys have been wasted by a clever opponent and there's no more money to build more. Everything you decide to build in *Act of War* has to be carefully considered.

In the single-player Operation, however, many of the missions revolve around making do with the units you start out with, or you're given a large sum of money from the word go. There's definitely more of an emphasis on just enjoying the tactical play, allowing *Act of War* to offer some truly fun sand-box style missions. The modern environments, such as the centre of London or Washington DC, have a great level of detail, and you'll see everything from parked cars and park benches to SWAT team blockades with police cars and ambulances and even hordes of angry protestors outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. Moving your units through places such as these, seeing your tanks crush civilian cars and watching air strikes level buildings is exciting stuff. Beefy machines will reap some real eye candy, as *Act of War* is probably the prettiest and most detailed RTS on the market.

A few typical RTS flaws do tend to hinder the game at times, from some clumsy pathfinding issues, to units sometimes not being aware enough of what's happening around them. The camera view also needs a higher level of zoom, because you'll regularly want to see more of the map around you at any one time. But these flaws aren't bad enough to hinder what is a thoroughly enjoyable RTS with a very bright multiplayer future. It might not be innovative enough to be deemed an out and out classic, but *Act of War* is definitely a cut above the *C&C* series to date, and comes highly recommended to anyone looking for a modern-warfare RTS built for today's gaming hardware.

ELIOT FISH

PC GAMES ADDICT Terrifically fun war on terror

IT'S › Clever › Fertile with potential tactics › Pretty

IT'S NOT › Difficult in single-player › So original › Full of FMV cheese

Liberating

89%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Atari ■ **Developer** Eugen ■ **They say** 1.5 GHz, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb video card ■ **We say** 2.6 GHz, 1Gb RAM, 128Mb video card
■ **Multiplayer** 1-8 LAN or Internet ■ **Link** www.atari.com/actofwar ■ **Influenced by** C&C Generals, CNN, 24 ■ **Alternatively** C&C Generals

Review

STAR WARS KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II THE SITH LORDS

Beware the power of the grey side

PC GAMES GOLD GAME ★★★★★

Our favourite Star Wars characters are a predictable bunch. Han Solo might let fly with a few wise cracks, but you know he has a heart of gold; Luke's the kind of kid that would open doors for Ewoks; whilst the Emperor wouldn't think twice about turning you into a Sith BBQ dish. Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, however, turns our perceptions of the light and dark side inside out. Indeed, this is a very grey game indeed. Can good deeds sometimes have bad consequences? Is someone you would consider a corrupting force, really just driven by passionate beliefs they wish others to adopt? Can droids be bad or are they just programmed that way? And so on. The Sith Lords is an extremely absorbing tale, full of twists and turns that are rarely explored in role-playing games that deal with questions of morality.

It's also a rushed sequel that should

Thumbnail Review

Sometimes it stumbles, but this sequel somehow soars instead.

- ☑ The Force
- ☑ Slave Girls
- ☑ Droids
- ☒ B-movie dialogue

Find out whether you're good, bad or as confused as the rest of us.

Lightsabers and Force Lightning is a powerful combo.

Political intrigue is a core theme, leading to open rebellion in the streets. Choosing a side isn't always black-and-white simple.

have had a few more months of development. No doubt Obsidian Entertainment, tasked with developing this sequel in the footsteps of BioWare, would have wanted to tweak and perfect The Sith Lords a little more in its final stages, but the LucasArts empire wanted to hit that perfect Christmas time market with the Xbox debut. Sadly, this PC version doesn't appear to have benefited from a few extra months behind closed doors – this is very much the same game as its console sibling, warts and all. Whilst the flaws are mostly technical – quest-log bugs that don't update tasks properly, cut-scene glitches that seem jarring, and other minor problems – the end-game definitely feels as though it could have benefited from a wee bit more fleshing out. You'll know what we mean when you get there. And get there you should, because this is still a superb RPG.

In some ways, leaving questions unanswered is a good thing – and possibly even intentional on behalf of the writers at Obsidian (which includes the highly talented Chris Avellone, who brought us the fabulous Planescape Torment) – as there's nothing better than a richly weaved plot that you can discuss endlessly with your friends after you've all finished playing it. What did this bit mean? What was so-and-so's motivation for doing THAT? Loose ends also mean you can re-play the game and get more out of it a second time, picking up on threads you missed the first time around, and sometimes even discovering the answers you were seeking were there all along. However, the game's final stages definitely feel rushed, and there's no doubting that given a bit more work, The Sith Lords would have ascended to classic status rather easily.

KOTOR II has a hell of a lot to get off its chest

One thing is for certain, The Sith Lords is a very well-written game. The story is original – and for the well-trodden Star Wars universe, that's really saying something – and all the dialogue that you exchange with the huge variety of NPCs is both entertaining and satisfying. The Sith Lords sits neatly next to the recently released Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines as a game that features wonderful characters, a great story and excellent NPC interaction, but suffers from a clunky closure and a few too many bugs. Both games are, however, essential RPGs to anyone that enjoys the genre, despite their problems. Such is the strength of a good story - along with the mechanics on hand for a player to fully immerse themselves in it.

When it comes to the action, as was the case with the original KotOR, combat in The Sith ▶

PLANET SUITE

Who would live in a place like Sith?

There's plenty of variety to *KOTOR II*'s locations; it's just a shame we've seen some of them before...

1

Your travels take in the lush grasslands of Dantooine, a key location in the original game. It fits the story, true, and has the handy side-effect of re-using textures.

2

Boo! Sith! Korriban is traditionally the home of the Jedis' evil cousins, and you must return here, too. Are you getting that warm, homely feeling yet?

3

At least Nar Shaddaa is new. Well, it's got a whiff of Taris about it, and is otherwise dull and grey. Luckily, the game's exciting bits take place in off-planet set-pieces.

KOTOR II: THE SITH LORDS

Combat is largely automated – just select attack types and powers to suit conditions.

Lords is all a bit too easy. There's a middle stage in the game where the game teeters at a level of challenge that requires a good dose of concentration during battle, but the difficulty doesn't sustain and most gamers will breeze through the action without gathering a single crease in their stately Jedi robes. Force powers become amazingly powerful in the latter stages of the game; and the deadly Force Push, once leveled up, can decimate whole rooms of foes with a few simple clicks of the mouse. Arming the player with powers and moves that most foes can't stand against is always going to limit the number of memorable battles.

Then again, by that stage of the game, you want to feel as though you are the uber-powerful Jedi/Sith, and realistically, you probably should be able to wade through your foes with such ease. Yes, you can rationalise it with the fiction, but that won't wash with everyone. In any case, Lightsaber action never ceases to look cool, so whilst the combat may be forgetable in terms of the challenges faced - the glowing trails accompanyied by that familiar low muffled electronic wailing noise will still have their usual magical effect. That's something nobody can forget.

Obsidian certainly went to some lengths to add more depth to the action, introducing a variety of lightsaber combat forms to switch between. Some give you bonuses against multiple opponents, whilst other more defensive stances make it easier for you to sit back and deflect laser bolts. Another is specifically to use in a one-on-one duel, such as against another lightsaber wielding opponent, with the only caveat that it leaves you more vulnerable to attacks from other assailants. Whilst it's admirable that this kind of depth has been introduced, its effectiveness in actual combat probably isn't as noticeable as it should be, and most gamers may not even change their lightsaber stance throughout the entire game.

> A Jedi mentor who's not a heroic cut-out?

Whilst a good portion of your adventure does involve hacking people down with your lightsaber, the combat in The Sith Lords isn't really the focus. Role-playing your character and exploring the relationships with your companions is where the real meat of the experience lies. This is by far a trickier moral mine-field to navigate than any action set-piece could be. You can now gain or lose influence with your companions, depending on your actions when they accompany you and what exactly your attitude is to them during conversation. Not only can you learn more of their back-story once you gain high enough influence, but you can get to the point where they might trust you to train them in the force, or reveal to you shocking information that you hadn't a clue about. It's not possible to please everyone at once though, and getting on one character's good side might lower your influence with another. It's been explored before in games like Baldur's Gate where a harsh drow priestess and a prissy, whining elven maiden join the hero and practically insist he take sides. Naturally, playing the Dark Side will have nasty consequences for those who believe in you, and likewise, being good around people just might help one of your companions "see the Light". This

TINKER, TAILOR

The New Republic

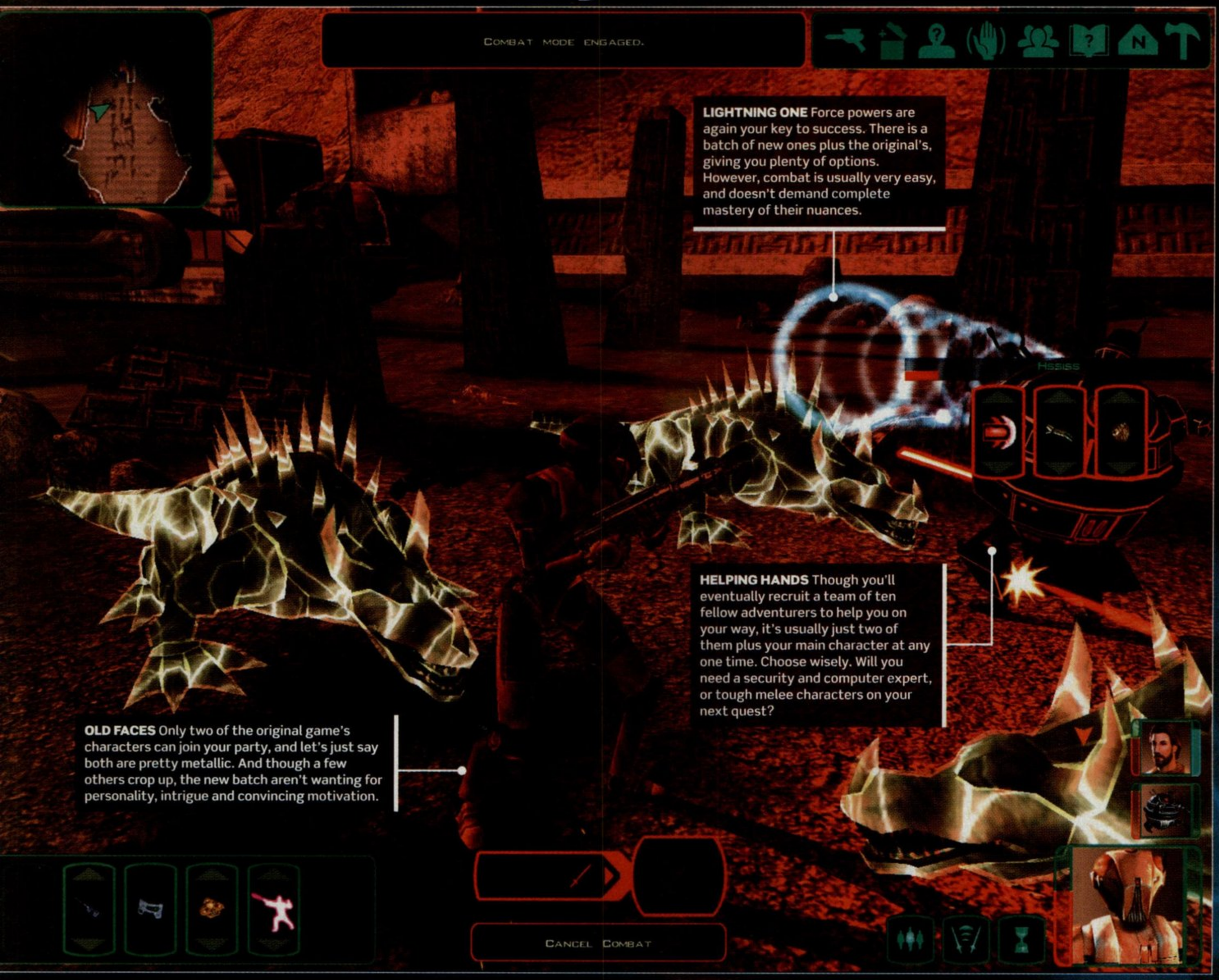
Obsidian have been busy adding new features aplenty. Here's a handful

Laboratory benches appear in many areas, allowing you to break down unwanted items and create new ones.

During interactions with your party, your choice of words will affect how much 'influence' you have over them.

Set-pieces sometimes pitch just one of your team into a difficult situation, demanding you use all their abilities to the full.

"You've Forced my hand..."



LIGHTNING ONE Force powers are again your key to success. There is a batch of new ones plus the original's, giving you plenty of options. However, combat is usually very easy, and doesn't demand complete mastery of their nuances.

HELPING HANDS Though you'll eventually recruit a team of ten fellow adventurers to help you on your way, it's usually just two of them plus your main character at any one time. Choose wisely. Will you need a security and computer expert, or tough melee characters on your next quest?

OLD FACES Only two of the original game's characters can join your party, and let's just say both are pretty metallic. And though a few others crop up, the new batch aren't wanting for personality, intrigue and convincing motivation.

is another reason why The Sith Lords is surprisingly re-playable. Not only can you experience the game as Light or Dark side, but you can take on new companions and delve into different sides to the story on a second time through. The story even has an explanation for why these companions are willing to blindly follow you into battle and do what you tell them to. These Obsidian guys have thought of everything, eh?

To shake things up a bit, the Sith Lords even gives you the opportunity to take control of your companions whilst your main character is busy elsewhere. At various stages in the game, you may perform functions as the T3 utility droid, get to see cutscenes of what characters are saying about you behind your back, as well as switch between missions that are taking place concurrently with different characters – much like the Star Wars movies themselves have parallel action scenes. Remember the tension of Luke fighting Vader in Return of the Jedi whilst Lando piloted the Millennium Falcon inside the Death Star to destroy it, with the other characters fighting off Stormtroopers on the surface of the moon of Endor? The Sith Lords tries to offer the same kind of dynamic, and it works well enough. It certainly gives you a chance to fully utilise the different skills of the different characters, rather than just experiencing the life of the Jedi who happens to keep a whole bunch of whelps in tow.

Overall, The Sith Lords is a wonderfully unfolding mystery that only just trips over itself in the final stages. Because expectations were so high after the first KoTOR game, a title noted everywhere for its outstanding plot, it stands to reason that The Sith Lords was always going to struggle to outshine its predecessor.

Let's hope Obsidian get their hands on KotOR III and fulfill the glowing potential that they've showcased in this strong sequel.

ELIOT FISH

PC GAMES ADDICT A flawed yet captivating exploration

IT'S › Buggy › Re-playable › Unpredictable › Ambiguous

IT'S NOT › More of the same › Difficult › Entirely finished

Darkly

87%

■ **Price** $99.95 ■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** LucasArts ■ **Developer** Obsidian ■ **They say** 2GHz, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card, 5Gb HD space ■ **We say** 2.6GHz, 1Gb RAM
■ **Multiplayer** None ■ **Link** www.kotor2.com ■ **Community** www.starwarsknights.com ■ **Influenced by** KOTOR, The Empire Strikes Back ■ **Alternatively** Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines

STAR WARS REPUBLIC COMMANDO

The men behind the helmet

Underneath the hard-hat, the clone weeps. He is alone, despite a million twin brothers. Bummer.

STRIFE STORY

When I grow up, I want to be a soldier

The accelerated growth of a clone trooper is touched upon in an early cut-scene. Here are the highlights

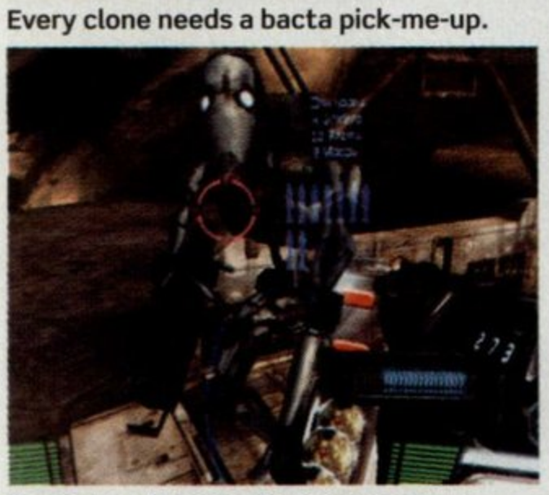
The Kamino midwives care for the babies. "We expect great things from you," says your surrogate mother. Nag nag nag.

Troopers are taught combat skills at the blaster ranges from an early age. Why can't they shoot straight in Star Wars, then?

Your First Helmet. Already, that split visor has a certain iconic feel – the blue glow denotes you're a clone above the rest.

Combat simulations hone the group's ability to fight as a unit. By this point, the troopers are ready to enter the civil war.

Every clone needs a bacta pick-me-up.



Battle droids are just cannon fodder.

It's team-building time on Kimono, as you're introduced to your new brothers in armour.

Jamie Griesemer, the architect of *Halo*'s celebrated gunplay, once said that a good game is "30 seconds of fun, that happens over and over again." *Republic Commando* is just that – 30 seconds of fun repeated over, and over, and over. But understand that this is a spectacular 30 seconds, full of explosions, precision military manoeuvres, nail-biting countdowns and never-ending floods of enemies. For that half-a-minute you're completely absorbed, fending off six-foot locusts, stabbing lizards in the face and lobbing electric grenades at robots. Yet, it's still that same narrowly defined 30 seconds, repeated time after time.

When we were first introduced to *Republic Commando*, LucasArts' Project Manager Sam Saliba described it as "Star Wars, but on steroids". Even if you don't agree with the hyperbole, *RC* is a rather unique interpretation of the Lucas legend. Out goes the orchestral score and scrolling yellow text. In comes a theme song by popular beat combo Ash, while a murky blue text block provides the briefest of contexts. Almost all of what you might recognise as Star Wars, including Jedi, heroic space battles, daft puppets, even the occasional human, is cut. All that's left is a gun at the bottom of the screen, three friends and an evil droid army. Ready, steady, go-team!

Thumbnail Review

SWAT meets Star Wars in a lightweight first-person shooter

- ☑ Command!
- ☑ Wookiees!
- ☑ A good blaster
- ☒ Lightsabers

The concept is sound, but the central idea never quite steps into gear. Still out-entertains most shooters.

It's based around The Clone Wars, the period book-ended by the movies Attack of the Clones and Revenge of the Sith. The galaxy has descended into civil war, between the Republic (backed up by your clone army) and the Separatists (armed with bugs, slavers, and a production line of battledroids.) The Commandos of the title are clone troopers trained up as independent warriors. They're like a SWAT team, but dressed in matching genes.

Enter the commandos and their det-packs

You and three cloned friends are tasked with saving the galaxy, together. They're capable of every task you are, be it sniping, lobbing grenades, or just straight blowing doors down. Each area is split into a series of mini set-pieces, beginning with a heavy, locked door. Enter the commandos and their det-packs. Once a door has been breached (accompanied by a superb animation routine where a charge is blown, quickly followed by the lead commando rolling a thermal detonator into the smoke) your squad fan-out into the new area. 'Hotspots' then appear as holographic projections on your HUD, as do light blue images of your squad-mates taking up these key positions and sniping or setting explosives. Simply press the F key, and your team-mates will scramble to obey these holographic orders. It's usually enough to limit the flow of baddies: if not, you can try 'slicing' the occasional terminal, or placing a detonation-pack. That usually involves a tense countdown, as one poor soul is ordered out from behind cover to be this minute's hero. If he falls you can even order up a rescue mission: you or a second trooper can crawl over to the unconscious body and provide a recharging shock via a portable defibrillator. It's not quite game over, even if you bite the blaster bolt yourself; your friends will continue to fight, and resuscitate you once the coast is clear. Or you can just order them to 'break protocol'

ON THE DISC We've taken *Republic Comando* and cloned a playable demo from it > Demos

and risk themselves to zap you back to life. When the dust clears, there's a chance to recharge via the handily placed bacta tanks, then it's on to the next door. Breach, clear, recharge. Breach, clear, recharge. Onward! This tactical system is beautiful, both in concept and final execution. But the intermediate design lets it down: the holographic squad control within the levels is a disappointment. It's under-used, practically wasted. What should have been the highlight of the game only highlights what should have been.

What's a hotspot not? A hotspot's not user-configurable, or prone to creative use. There's no *real* tactic involved in placing your squad, because, in almost every situation you enter, there's always less than, or just enough, positions for the clones under your command.

Republic Commando rarely offers tactical problems for you to overcome. The set-pieces have a pre-defined solution literally set in the stone of the level. There's always a clear path to success. The tactics that you're going to use are already scripted. Some enemies will continually respawn, like ▶

STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO

Battle rages on Geonosis. No Jedi, though.

That's right, men. You stay in front...

the droids, while the rest will just clamber out of grates and leapfrog the walls to pop up behind you. That's a real frustration, voiding any tactical decision you might have made.

Peer past the strategy to focus on the gunplay in *Republic Commando* and the disappointment continues. The fault lies with your default weapon, a swiss-army style blaster rifle that can be disassembled and re-assembled into a grenade launcher and sniper rifle. It's just too weedy, and can only hold 300 rounds. To put that in context, it takes around 100 of those to take down a battle-droid, one of the most common enemies. Ammo packs are rare, forcing you to rely on your poxy pistol too often. There are better ways: a well placed electro-magnetic grenade takes down droids near instantly, but too often, you're left with no option but to simply pour fire into the target, strafing left and right to avoid getting caught in the return fire. Your armoury is complemented by the discarded weapons of the enemy, which include a nifty little energy shotgun (the only gun to carry any sense of weight), Wookiee bowcasters, and a massive rocket launcher, best kept in reserve for clearing any manned turrets. When you're artificially separated from your team in a couple of levels, highlighting the lack of nuance in the combat, doubts begin to set in.

Why is this game still *fun*?

Why are you playing this? If the shooting's not great, and the strategy's not there, why is this game still *fun*? Why are those 30 seconds exciting? How can the faulty design be reconciled with the high fun quotient?

Try this: *Republic Commando* features a ludicrously high explosion-per-second ratio. You can barely walk forward without something blowing up in your face, crashing through the window. Ambushes, last ditch defences and fast-paced assaults are the norm. Meanwhile, your team-mates are continually chattering among themselves, congratulating each other on a job well done, marking any enemies spotted, announcing their next move, and patting you on the back, while making wry jokes about their situation. On top of that, add the movement: hallways dense with smoke and blaster-fire, your three team-mates fanning out to cover all directions. Their animations are just *superb*. Watch as they peek out from behind walls, sniping at their targets, rifles cradled in their chests. They're so believable, walking and moving as you'd imagine professional soldiers would. Their actions resonate somewhere in your head.

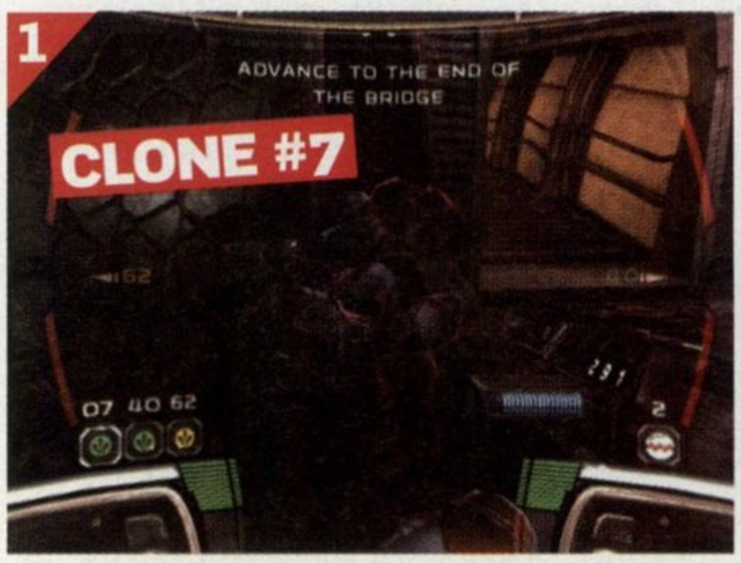
Then, consider the sound design, which merges fragments of John Williams' score with some quite spectacular spot effects. There's a great mini-documentary you can unlock that shows the efforts the developers went to – including a hilarious scene where an engineer slaps a halved melon into a bed of cabbage to create the squishy lizard walk of a Trandoshan slaver. It pays off. Even if the game elements don't quite work, the sound just brings it all together, dragging you into the action.

And it's surprisingly articulate, with some superb one-liners. When you discover vital evidence of a conspiracy to enslave the Wookiees, the wise-cracking Scorch exclaims, "Yeah! Free Wookiee life debts for everyone!" Rounding a corner, to be greeted by a huge squad of Super Battle Droids, he can't resist pointing

TUBE BIRTHS

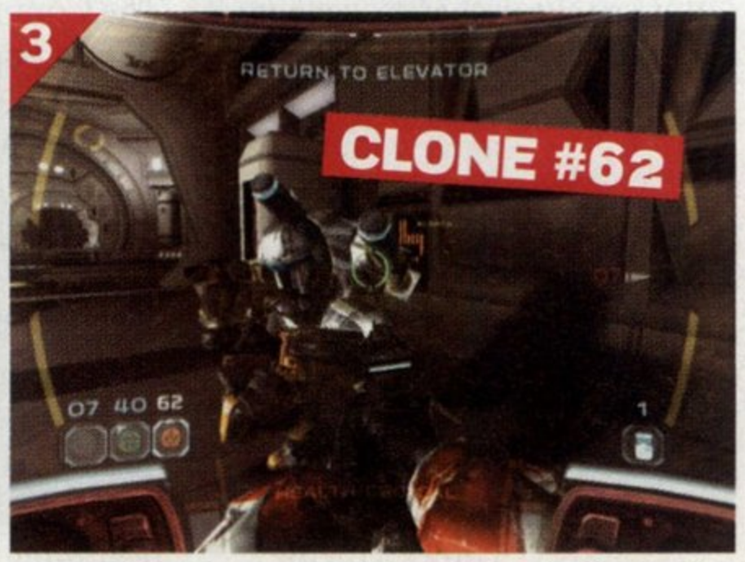
The pod people

They may be clones, but each of your team-mates has their own distinct personality and skills



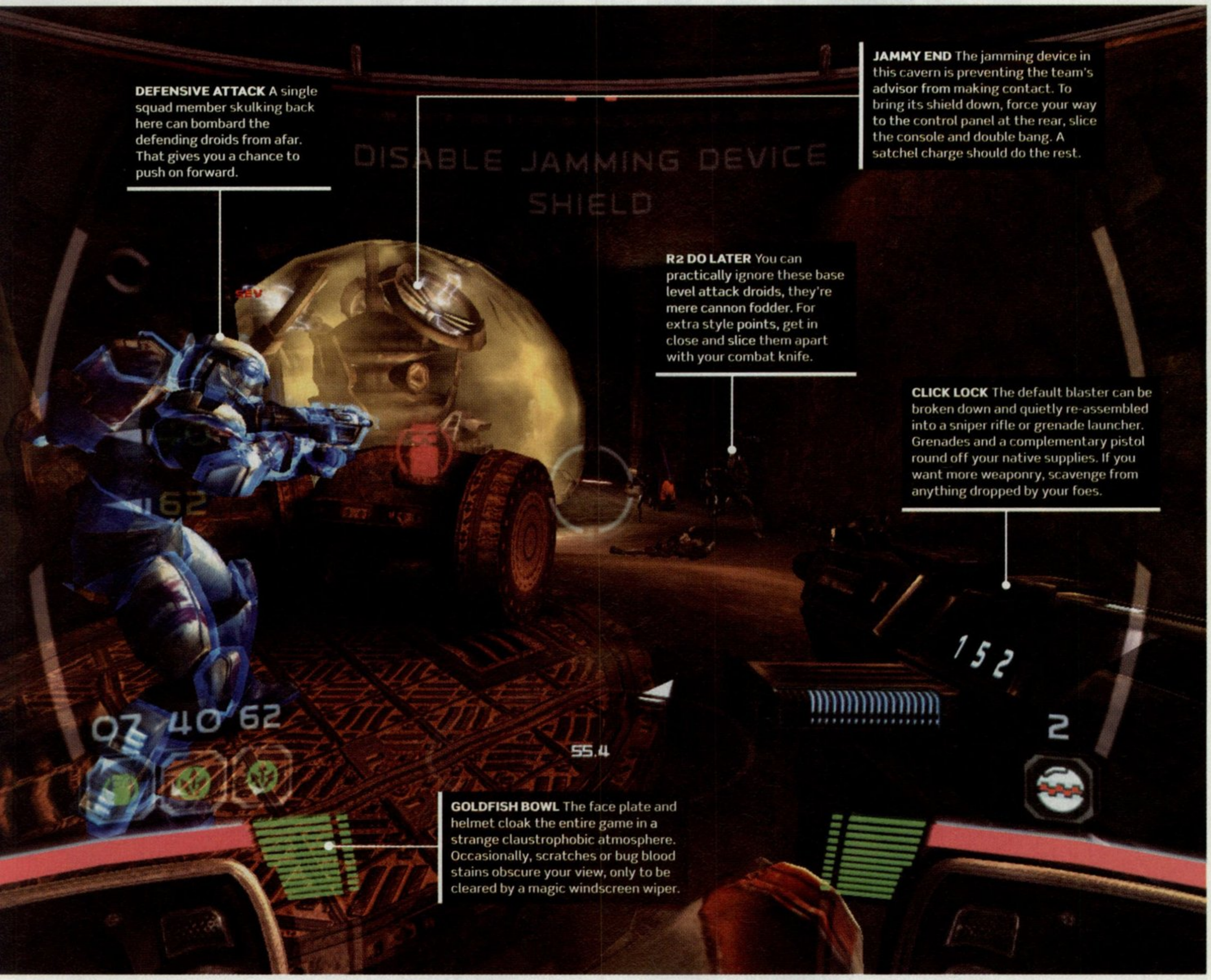
SEV Closet psychopath and full-time sniper, Sev's the absurd, growling, mean one of the bunch. Don't get in his way or he'll moan. Or shoot you. Your choice.

FIXER This technical specialist is the team's first choice to slice any consoles. He spends a lot of time bending down, ignoring blaster fire and rocket hail.



SCORCH The wisecracks and bravado are clearly a front. Scorch's job is to ditch his guns and clear a way for the team with his det-packs. He always takes a pounding.

"There's no 'I' in 'team-based AI'"



DEFENSIVE ATTACK A single squad member skulking back here can bombard the defending droids from afar. That gives you a chance to push on forward.

JAMMY END The jamming device in this cavern is preventing the team's advisor from making contact. To bring its shield down, force your way to the control panel at the rear, slice the console and double bang. A satchel charge should do the rest.

R2 DO LATER You can practically ignore these base level attack droids, they're mere cannon fodder. For extra style points, get in close and slice them apart with your combat knife.

CLICK LOCK The default blaster can be broken down and quietly re-assembled into a sniper rifle or grenade launcher. Grenades and a complementary pistol round off your native supplies. If you want more weaponry, scavenge from anything dropped by your foes.

GOLDFISH BOWL The face plate and helmet cloak the entire game in a strange claustrophobic atmosphere. Occasionally, scratches or bug blood stains obscure your view, only to be cleared by a magic windscreen wiper.

out that "*These* are the droids we're looking for." It's the most enthusiastic of games. Every action you take, from decking a droid with the butt of your rifle, to ordering your men into near suicidal positions is greeted with a cheery affirmative and a compliment. "That's a great idea, sir", or "that was an astounding shot, boss." It's like the game's chatting you up: welcome but slightly disconcerting. "That blue visor matches your beautiful eyes. Nice ass, too."

Remember, all of this is going on at once: great walls of blaster fire; leaping and dancing enemies; team-mates yelling for cover; you piling in round after round and scavenging what ammo you can. The new objectives might always be the same, but they're constantly being updated. "Right," says your commander, "you've sealed this spaceship hanger from one alien menace. But there's another one just down the hall. It's a bit harder, but you'll enjoy it. Oh, and when you've finished, you might want to check the next one along too." That constant escalation demands you continue playing, dragging you through to the conflict on the Wookiee homeworld, Kashyyyk. It's only then that your reservations are forgotten, and you just enjoy it as simple mindless entertainment. It's never exhilarating, but always absorbing. You catch yourself an hour later, in a peculiar state of near comatose reflection and unconscious thought. Your jaw is gently drooping, with strands of drool beginning to form.

Which brings us back to those 30 second fragments. In *Halo*, those 30 seconds were made of pure game decision: about when and where to move, and what to shoot. In *Republic Commando* that choice in the way you approach a situation is made for you, yet the style, story and spectacle remain. Your 30 seconds are spent doing exactly what the game wants you to do, but that's just fine. What the games wants you to do is just enjoy yourself. *Star Wars Republic Commando* might never exhilarate, but it never stops entertaining you.

TIM EDWARDS

PC GAMES ADDICT Stylish and explosive fun

IT'S › Just entertainment! › Bang! › Repeated over and over!

IT'S NOT › A straight FPS › Strategic › Particularly Star Warsy.

Chewy

81%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Activision ■ **Developer** LucasArts ■ **They say** 1GHz CPU, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card ■ **We say** 2GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card
■ **Multiplayer** Up to 16 players, online ■ **Link** www.lucasarts.com/games/swrepubliccommando ■ **Influenced by** Halo, Terra Nova ■ **Alternatively** Full Spectrum Warrior

DARWINIA

Proof we are all descended from *Donkey Kong*

The stickies are enthusiastic if inept gunners.

Friends, I have a dream. A beautiful (*insane* – Ed) dream, that one day a games magazine will have the guts and vision to dispense with words entirely. It will review with screenshots only, their number roughly indicating score, their choice, size and placement communicating crucial strengths and weaknesses.

Demonstrating the viability of this system with words alone is like erecting a 'Don't Throw Stones At This Sign' sign or attempting to stamp-out terrorism by riling most of the Middle East, but I'll give it a shot.

Example 1. *Half-Life 2* review. Forty carefully selected images revealing the richness of character, location, and interactions. Embedded sequences illustrate the physics, AI, and storytelling. Example 2. *Alexander* (humdrum historical RTS). Ten grabs, the first four from *Cossacks* and *American Conquest*, the last two, larger, *Rome: Total War*. Example 3. OFLC permitting *Leisure Suit Larry Magna Cum Laude*. Just one image: a rear view of the naked hero, arms raised in dismay, flaccid genitals glimpsed through open legs.

The most persuasive arguments in favour of my patented pictorial reviewing process are games like *Darwinia*, games so slippery, so fresh and unburdened, that even the best-chosen adjectives and nouns run the risk of distorting and devaluing them. This is going to sound a bit mentally bent (*Why alter the tone now?* – Ed), but if you are one of those supremely fortunate souls who currently knows nothing about this game I recommend you give up on the text portion of this review at the end of this paragraph, and spend the next half hour devouring the screenshots, contemplating the score, and deciding which purchase method will secure you a copy in the shortest time.

Where are my resource tallies? My minimap?

ON THE DISC Is your appetite for neon polygons whetted? Time to try *Darwinia* for yourself > Demos

You weak-willed word-lover! Oh well – against my better judgement – on with the stream of vowels and consonants...

Genres and their conventions are grimy prison cells for games. I know this. You know this. Him over there, pretending to be a pigeon, knows it. Occasionally an inmate digs a tunnel, climbs a wall, or escapes in the back of a laundry truck but all too often, we – the folks on the outside – foolishly refuse to harbour them. *Hostile Waters*, *Startopia*, *Army Men: Pro Baseball*... the list of games that have broken-out only

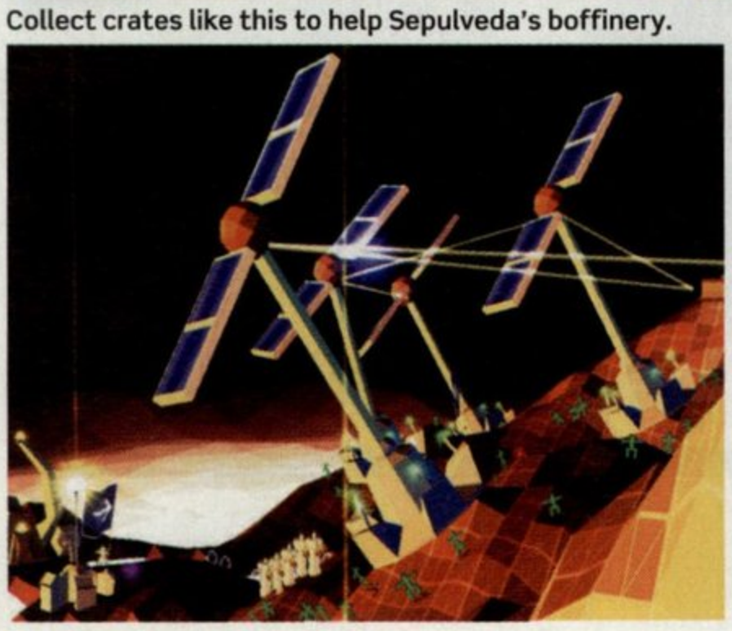
Thumbnail Review

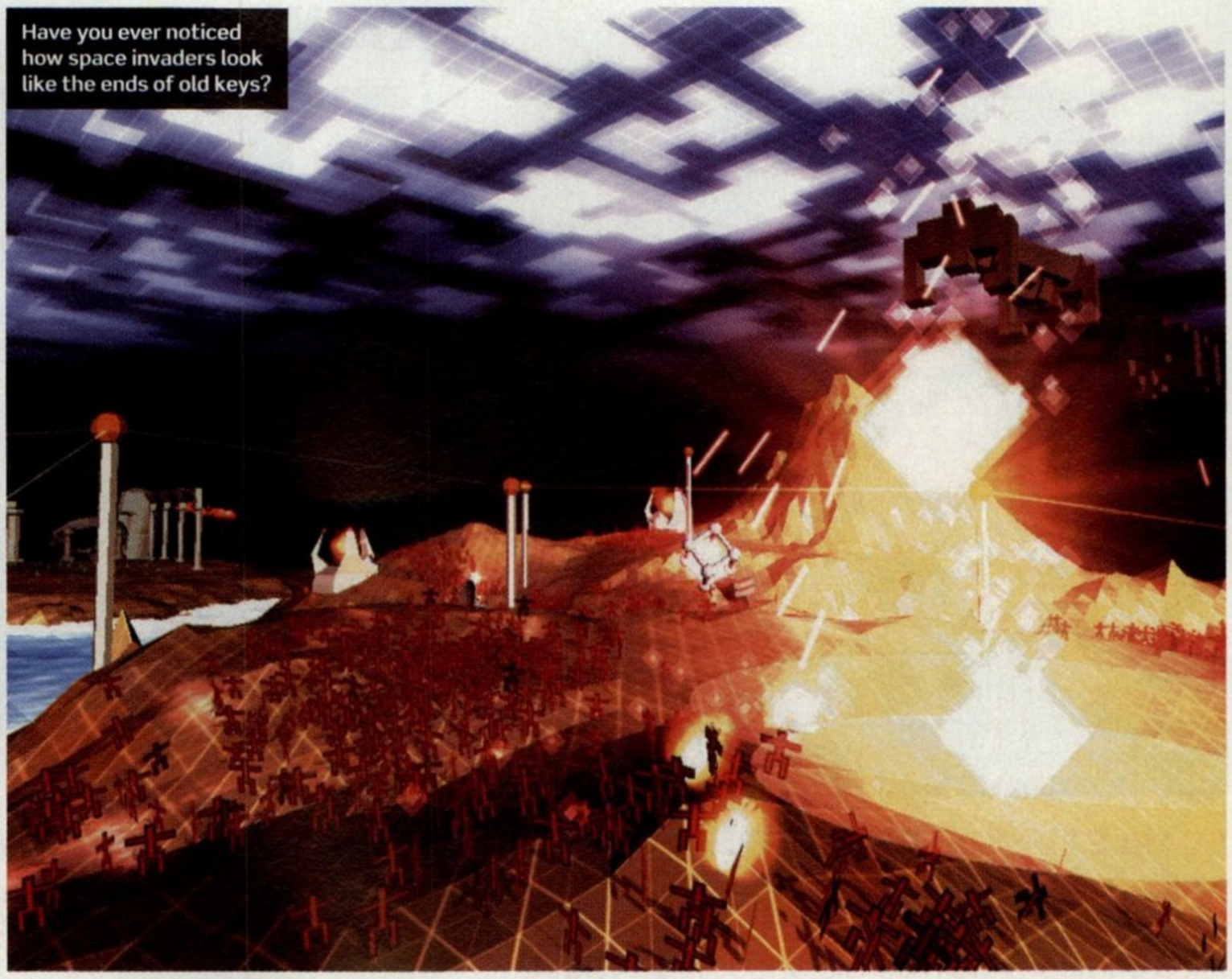
Proof that not all game developers have sold their souls

- ☑ Ants
- ☑ Centipedes
- ☑ Spiders
- ☒ Antipeders

A gorgeous, character-packed curio that combines strategy and arcade action with great aplomb. An essential purchase for nostalgics.

Collect crates like this to help Sepulveda's boffinery.





ARCADENCES

The origin of species

The gaming genes in *Darwinia*'s chromosomes

Squad antics smack of Sensible Software's 1993 camo'd hit *Cannon Fodder*. About time someone did a 3D remake we say.

The stickmen only trust their own. To control them you'll need to route your orders through *Lemmings*-style officers.

Real centipedes don't keep scurrying if severed. The ones in *Darwinia* and Atari's 1981 classic on the other hand...

Who remembers Ultimate C64 classics like *Jet Pac, LoadRunner* and *TransAm*? The lads at Introversion obviously do.

to be ruthlessly ignored by Peter Punter is as long as a fairly long snake or a very short oil pipeline. It would be truly heartbreaking if this – the latest, most audacious fugitive – suffered the same fate.

Using the language of incarceration and defeat, *Darwinia* is a game that spot-welds the frenetic laser fury of traditional arcade shooters to the fluid structure-focussed warmongering of classical RTS. Put plainly, when you aren't manically spewing photon bolts at seething carpets of wriggly viruses or tossing grenades and airstrike markers at bigger nasties, you're pondering battle tactics, organising resource gathering, or choosing research avenues.

Cripes, two paragraphs of seemingly innocuous description and already I'm creating mountains of misconceptions. Real-time strategy, resource gathering, research options... all these terms fit, after a fashion, but they also suggest a conventionality, an adherence to genre doctrine, that just isn't present. My first hour with the game was filled with questions like... If this is indeed the RTS it appears to be, why is the unit cap set at three? Why must every new recruit be summoned with a mouse-scribed pictogram? Why can't I drag-select? Where are my resource tallies, my minimap? Where are my multiplayer and my skirmish modes?

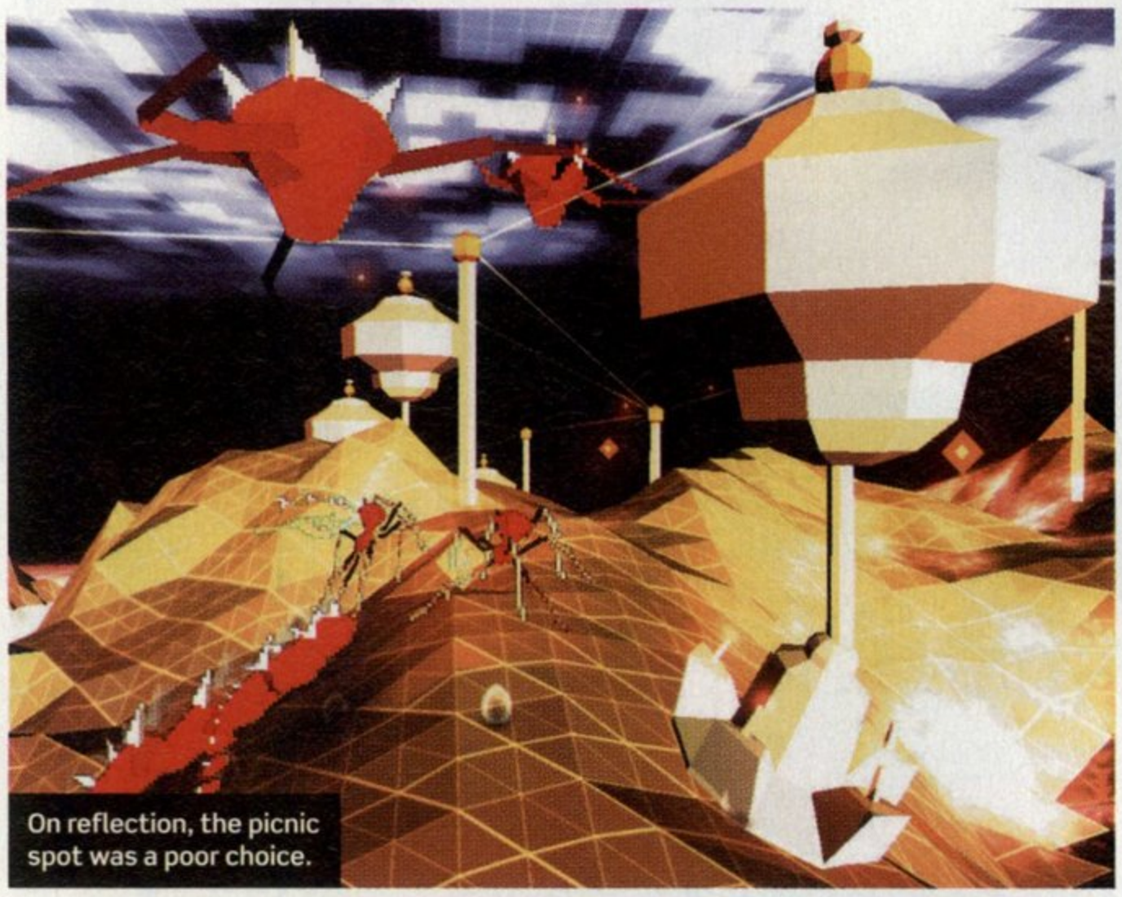
A week of priceless, unforgettable play later, I still haven't got answers to all of these questions, but I am – tellingly – no longer seeking them with any urgency. *Darwinia* does things its own sweet way. It's sometimes irritating, it's usually endearing. Anyone old enough to remember the days when PCs came emblazoned with glossy rainbows will instantly recognise the quirky humanity, the feeling that the game is blazing its own trail rather than following the wheel ruts of the wagon ahead. The game's retro accents undoubtedly have something to do with it, but more than once I did get this strange sense – and I mean this as a compliment – that I was playing a game created by someone who had recently awoken from a twenty year coma.

It plays like something created in the days when the PM had a personality and my idea of romance was pashing up Cheryl Cooper underwater in the school swimming pool (*Yesterday then* – Tim's Mum) *yet* it also feels as fresh as a dew-dropped daisy. Didn't I tell you we would have been better off reviewing this one without words?

I'll admit that going the mute route would make explaining *Darwinia*'s simple but subtle story fairly tricky. How do you put across in pictures the fact that the world of *Darwinia* itself is a virtual civilisation seeded by a reclusive Clive Sinclair-type inside a supercomputer built from thousands of unsold '80s-era PCs? How do you tell the reader that once they've parted with their seventy odd bucks and surrendered about half of that amount in HD megabytes (small is beautiful), they will have access to the titular land and be invited to join forces with the overworked Dr Sepulveda in purging it of a pernicious viral menace? Perhaps the real question should be: Is it important that you learn this kind of stuff from a review?

The provision of information is a subject that the Introverts obviously thought long and hard about. It's hard to recall a game that shunned numbers, words, and screen-cluttering panel furniture so religiously. From the main menu screen (an ugly term for such an attractive, atmospheric space) to the game view, there is almost nothing utilitarian or statistical on show, nothing to spoil the splendid ▶

DARWINIA



On reflection, the picnic spot was a poor choice.

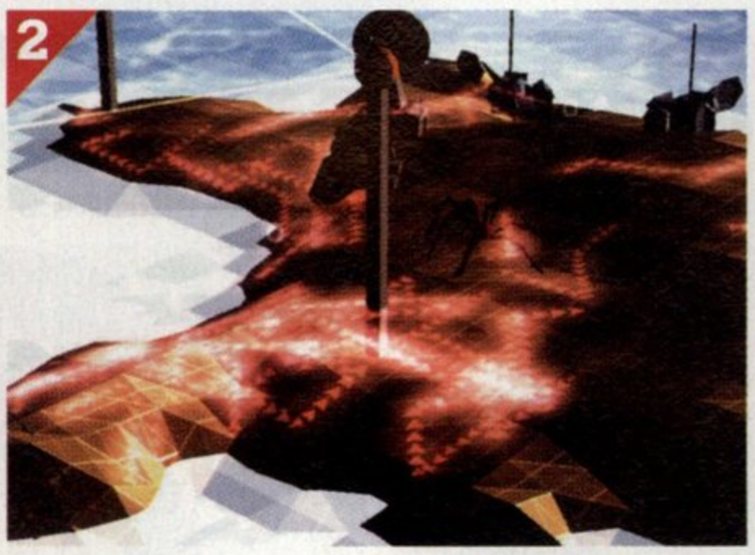
We're looking forward to the *Marble Madness* mod.

SCARLET FEVER

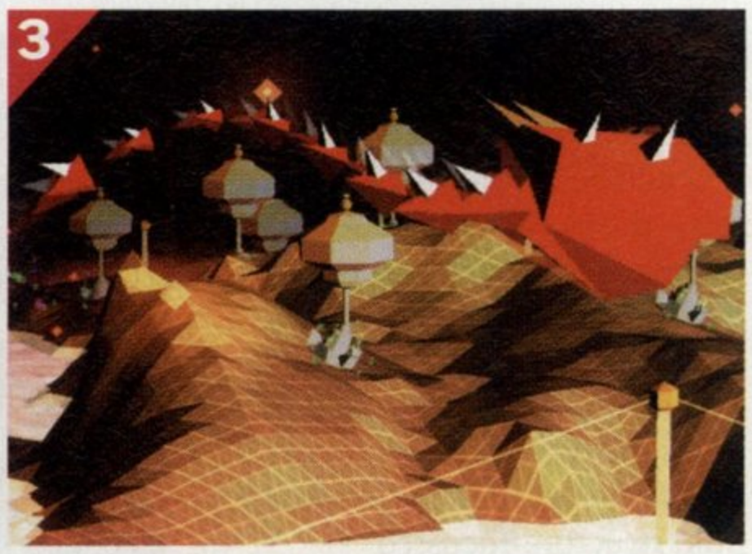
The red menace

If it's crimson and moving, shoot first, chat later

Because *Darwinia* is devoid of giant glasses and huge pieces of card, it's recommended you use grenades and/or rockets to deal with these leaping, egg-laying arachnids.



Viruses or virii? Introversion prefer the latter but we won't hold it against them. Whatever the correct plural, these red wrigglers must be culled in their thousands.



The Soul Destroyer didn't win its name in a raffle. This giant flying centipede is unique in consuming the souls of its victims along with their crunchy pixels and polygons.

views or pop the mesmerising experiential soap bubble. If you want to give the Doc a new research topic (tri-level unit enhancements are unlocked for study once relevant research artefacts are found and processed), create a unit, or consult objectives, you must temporarily toggle a separate full-screen display. It's hardly ergonomic (Why can't I mouse-summon new units without switching screens? Why are objectives and research topics spread across two screens when they'd plainly fit on one?) yet, somehow, it sits comfortably within the design.

The lack of stats, scores, hitpoint bars, and all the other distracting visual paraphernalia usually associated with today's strategy games, is wonderfully liberating. While a few missions require you to save a certain number of Darwinians (the semi-sentient stickmen who 'live' inside the machine) or generate a particular quantity of some level-specific commodity, these numbers are tracked on the objective screen, meaning you tend to play rather than bean count. It's a similar story with units. Because the engineers, soldier squads, and armour that fight your battles, activate structures, and harvest souls cost nothing to produce, and aren't encumbered with morale, experience, and health gubbins, you find yourself using them instinctively.

Free units. At most development studio brainstorming sessions that kind of suggestion would get you the kind of looks usually reserved for three-legged puppies, and senile grandparents. It only works in *Darwinia* because of that crucial unit cap (three) and the fact that one of the most important code servants – the squads – can't fight their way out of a damp paper bag without human assistance. While the engineers will, of their own volition, gather any soul crystals in their immediate vicinity (when anything perishes in *D*, it leaves a soul which can be harvested, recycled, and used to incubate a new sticky) squads work best when the player is directing their fire, *Syndicate*-style, with roving cursor and constantly-depressed LMB. It's not exactly brain surgery – position pixellated platoon within weapon range of a virus rash, a knot of centipedes, or a nest of spiders, and blaze away with laserfire, rockets, and grenades until the squirming stops – but it complements the tactical stuff perfectly.

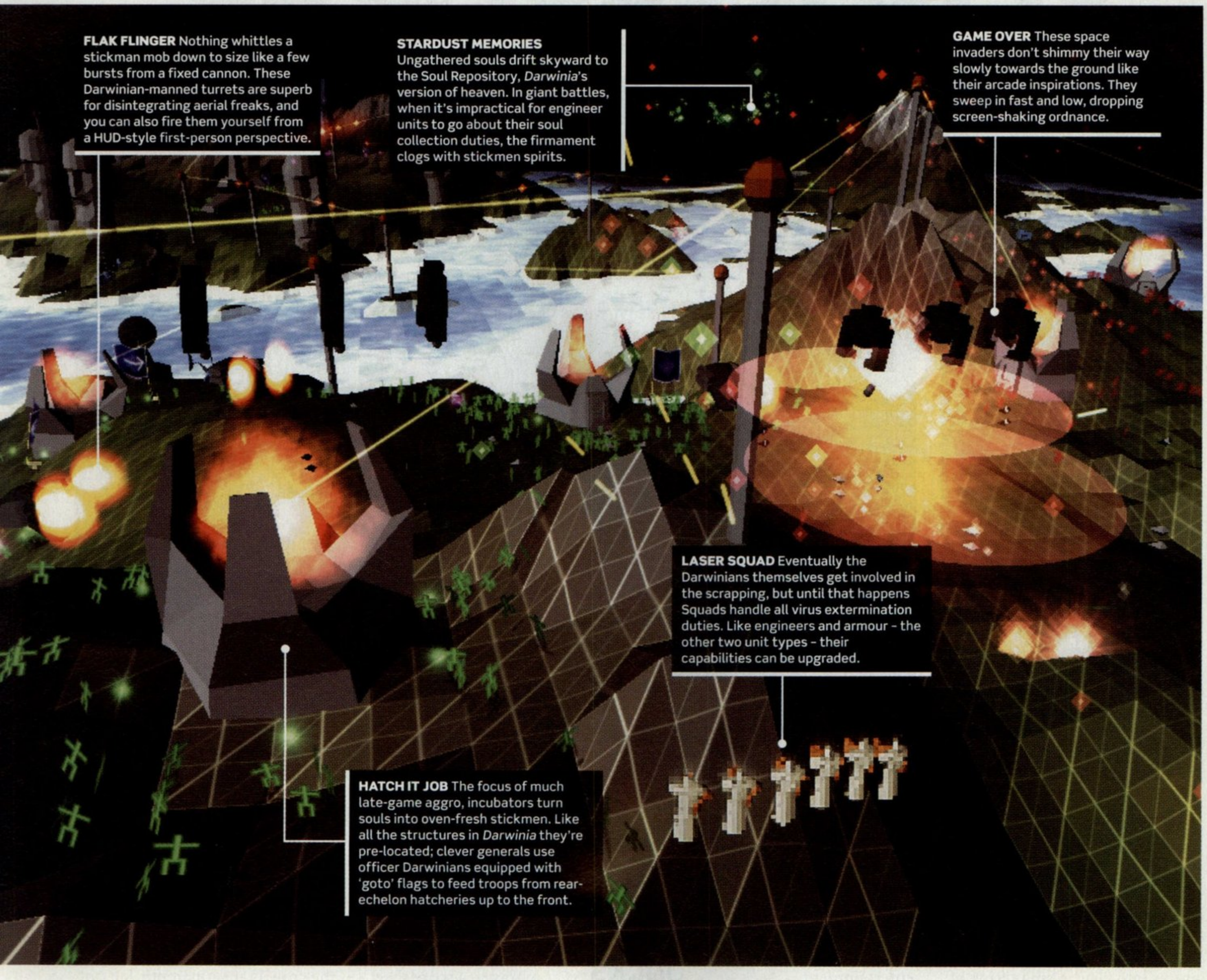
It gets under your skin faster than a thirsty tick

Rereading what I've written so far (seldom a good idea) I realise I'm not doing a very good job of explaining why this game gets under your skin faster than a thirsty tick. I think it's time I cracked open the Emergency Nouns Pack and started bandying around words like... 'coherence', 'character', and 'colostomy' (Actually, I think I'll put that last one back). Time too to start talking about two of *Darwinia*'s most impressive assets; it's absorbing missions and its sublime visuals.

Uninspired single-player campaigns blight a scary proportion of contemporary strategy games. *Darwinia*, thank God, is not one of them. Its sequence, though slightly on the short side (don't expect months of play) is an object lesson in restraint, coherence, and pacing. As you delve deeper, cleansing more and more of the lovely locales, you get the strong impression that the campaign

TAKEN APART

"The Battle for Biosphere Ridge"



FLAK FLINGER Nothing whittles a stickman mob down to size like a few bursts from a fixed cannon. These Darwinian-manned turrets are superb for disintegrating aerial freaks, and you can also fire them yourself from a HUD-style first-person perspective.

STARDUST MEMORIES Ungathered souls drift skyward to the Soul Repository, *Darwinia*'s version of heaven. In giant battles, when it's impractical for engineer units to go about their soul collection duties, the firmament clogs with stickmen spirits.

GAME OVER These space invaders don't shimmy their way slowly towards the ground like their arcade inspirations. They sweep in fast and low, dropping screen-shaking ordnance.

LASER SQUAD Eventually the Darwinians themselves get involved in the scrapping, but until that happens Squads handle all virus extermination duties. Like engineers and armour – the other two unit types – their capabilities can be upgraded.

HATCH IT JOB The focus of much late-game aggro, incubators turn souls into oven-fresh stickmen. Like all the structures in *Darwinia* they're pre-located; clever generals use officer Darwinians equipped with 'goto' flags to feed troops from rear-echelon hatcheries up to the front.

concept may have actually come before the game engine, the fit is just so... *natural*. But then everything about *Darwinia* – even, bizarrely the minor AI deficiencies – feels natural.

Just in case you hadn't noticed, it's also a visual tour de force, the most artistically exciting PC game, well, ever. This is a game that unquestionably passes the 'Art' test. Screen-grabbing it was joyous, wherever you looked – gloriously naked polygons, brittle beauty, unexpected tone poems, eye-watering vistas. What could so easily have been a cheesy melting-pot (*I think the word you are groping for is 'fondue'* – Swiss Ed) of retro gaming references and yesteryear styles actually turns-out to be something incredibly original, gobsmackingly gorgeous. Photo-realism? Put it in a sack. Weight it down with bump-mapped rocks, and toss it in your local canal.

It's a fair cop. The pictorial review approach is totally useless when it comes to audio. Then again, how often is a game soundtrack worthy of comment? Rarely, but in this instance it does warrant a few sentences. You won't find too many videogame tunes better or more fitting than Trash80's contributions here, and anyone that reaches for 'Escape' when DMA_SC's 'Visitors From Dreams' is rolling during the game intro is a machine. The in-game sounds generated by the viral hordes and the stickmen are similarly excellent. Electronic beeps, squelches, and chirrups that wash together into the eeriest of choruses.

Last paragraph and I still can't shake the nagging feeling that I've done more damage than good with this review. *Darwinia* is a game that will remind you why you love gaming so much. It's a pure, faintly religious experience, understated yet deeply memorable. There are faults – the control fiddliness and odd pathfinding problem – but to make a song and dance about these would be like criticising a Pro Hart because it appeared there were a few dribbles of paint on the frame.

TIM STONE

PC GAMES ADDICT Soulful fusion of strategy and shooter

IT'S › Art › Haunting › A one-off

IT'S NOT › Bloated › Classifiable › Style over substance

Galapagosh

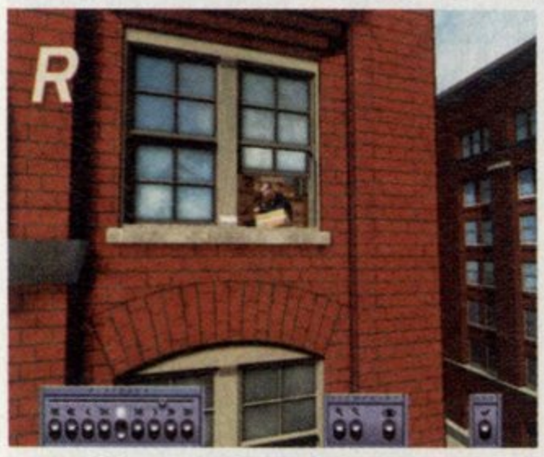
90%

■ **Release** Out now (online) ■ **Publisher** Introversion ■ **Developer** In-house ■ **They say** 600MHz CPU, 128Mb, 32Mb video card ■ **We say** 1.8GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb video card ■ **Multiplayer** None ■ **Link** www.darwinia.co.uk ■ **Influenced by** Sir Clive ■ **Alternatively** Tron 2.0

JFK: RELOADED

How to make a name for yourself as a developer: lesson one

The motorcade turns into Elm Street...



...Oswald ensures it's a nightmare.

A difficult shot for Lee Harvey Oswald. I wasn't prepared for quite how difficult a shot it would be for me.

I'm crouching by the window on the sixth floor of the book depository as the motorcade moves into view. A smattering of cheers rise up. The President waves and smiles. The open-top cars turn left into Elm Street. Click-zoom. Oswald exhales. My finger hovers over the left mouse button. I fire. JFK bucks with the impact to his right shoulder; the Governor in the seat in front is clipped too. Screams drift up from the roadside. I fire again, the bullet ricocheting off the car's bodywork, through the back of JFK's skull and out through his face in a puff of red mist. I feel slightly nauseous.

And that, barring many replay options, 3D ballistics analysis and a comparison to the real event, is that. This 3D 'simulation' of the JFK assassination is one of the shortest games ever made. But then, its very status as a game is open to debate.

Not because I think it's bad or morally questionable. Simply categorising it as a game, as a piece of entertainment, provokes a reaction; implies that it doesn't take its subject seriously. But seen as a historical simulation of one of the 20th century's most shocking moments, *JFK: Reloaded* is no more a tasteless cash-in than any WWII film, and makes few concessions to PC gaming fripperies. You might have expected alternative shooting positions to test out conspiracy theories, or a mad dash out of the building in order to escape. Instead, it's cold. You could imagine it being used in a remake of Oliver Stone's JFK.

I fire. JFK bucks with the impact

Your sole goal is to reproduce the exact findings of the Warren Commission Report: the timings, targets and ricochets of all the shots apparently fired by Oswald. After the brief action and the replay, the ballistics report is followed by – for want of a better phrase – a score sheet. Points are awarded for reproducing Oswald's actions precisely.

You're also invited to enter a competition to win $100,000 by executing (if you'll excuse the expression) a perfect run on one of ten competitive chances. For me, that's where the game crosses the line into pure sensationalism, leaving it open to accusations of trivialising an event which still troubles many people. Would we be comfortable with a game which rewarded those able to *perfectly* recreate the beating of Rodney King?

JFK is technically competent without particularly impressing; the crowds are apparently left out to ensure decent framerates on low-end machines, but Dealey Plaza feels bare. Yet the setting is instantly recognisable from the Zapruder film and the objective conveys a discomfiting sense of realism. We've seen the documentaries and films, read the books, and so here's the first-person shooter. Never has that genre tag been so apt.

ROSS ATHERTON

PC GAMES ADDICT Unsettling historical sim

IT'S › Very, very, very short › Gory › Accurate (apparently)

IT'S NOT › A normal FPS › In the best taste › Easy to take the first shot

Snapshot

60%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Traffic Games ■ **Developer** In-house ■ **They say** 400MHz CPU, 128Mb RAM ■ **We say** 2GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 256Mb 3D card ■ **Multiplayer** None ■ **Link** www.jfkreloaded.com ■ **Influenced by** JFK (the film and the man), conspiracy theories ■ **Alternatively** The Political Machine

PAINKILLER BATTLE OUT OF HELL

See what they did there?

Sewers, yes, but beautiful sewers.

So why is it clowns scare kids again?

Painkiller is to FPSs what running round playgrounds making machine gun noises is to war. Unsophisticated. Likely to end badly if an adult tries it. It was pure old school 'run and gun' in a rather stuffy, serious FPS gaming climate. This add-on, *Battle Out Of Hell*, seems a little embarrassed by its simplicity. It starts with an earnest cutscene that grows exponentially more dull as it explores, at length, exactly why you're going back to hell. It talks up all kinds of characters, motivations and clever machinations. Then it ends. And you're aiming at monsters and firing again, and that's it. Again.

Perhaps you wouldn't expect vast change from an add-on pack, but there are differences. For a start, it's much harder on any given setting and immediately throws you into tight areas with weedy weaponry. This, though, is the only way it *can* be harder, as the only real danger is getting surrounded. Constant strafing/endless firing will still see you through the game pretty easily.

More interestingly, the imagery has changed. Where the original prefered fake *Quake* browns and flatpacked satanic imagery, *Battle Out Of Hell* – just be grateful it's not called I Would Do Anything For Lucifer, But I Wouldn't Do That – appears to have been playing *Silent Hill*. Visions of hell are less 'spooky' 16th Century churches, more businessmen throwing themselves from skyscrapers, multi-storey carparks of bomb-rigged cars and murderous surgeons snorting their own gas. The jumping suicides, in no way styled after the events of 9/11 but still inevitably reminiscent, were fairly chilling.

As were the children in sacks. If firing into crowds of kids with glowing red eyes feels a bit dubious, then blowing away shuffling sprogs trapped in pillow cases always does. But then, this is supposed to be hell, isn't it? Not that nice? It's not actually scary in the way the Silent Hill series can be, though. You find yourself stabbed with the noses of Pinnochios, shot by spacemen, injected by cackling nurses, vomited on by zombies and slapped by clowns. It's like trying to walk down Oxford Street on Mardi Gras night.

Unsurprisingly, it's not worth rushing out to buy *Painkiller* just for this, but to be honest the box is nice. But if you've got it already, this is worthwhile – another helping of fast-paced yet undemanding shooting, taking in some varied locations. It's pretty but vacant, dumb like a Rambo film but guiltily enjoyable in a cathartically murderous way. The story is pointless and the levels make little sense thematically, but forget cutscenes and everything else – this is about aiming at monsters and firing. Again.

STEVE WILLIAMS

PC GAMES ADDICT Shooter with its own brains blown out

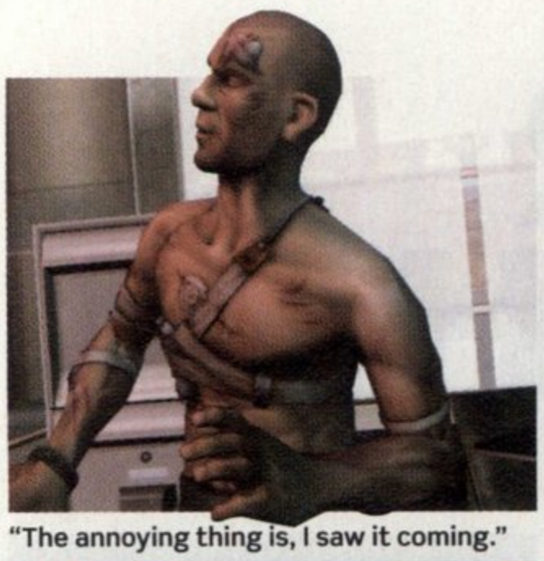
IT'S › Hectic › A bad pun › More varied

IT'S NOT › One giant leap › A relief › Worth buying *Painkiller* for

Prescribed

68%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** DreamCatcher ■ **Developer** People Can Fly ■ **They say** 1.5GHz CPU, 384Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card ■ **We say** 2.5GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card ■ **Multiplayer** 16 players, online ■ **Link** www.painkillergame.com ■ **Community** www.pkeuro.com ■ **Influenced by** Quake, Silent Hill ■ **Alternatively** Serious Sam



"The annoying thing is, I saw it coming."

(Below) "I love it when you pick up men."

Huge balls of energy. It's like being 18 again.

SECOND SIGHT

Second chance. Wasted

One power you won't find in *Second Sight*'s menus – strangely, given the title – is the ability to see the future. On the other hand, this could just be a great big clue to what the game's really about, and a terribly clever one at that. I couldn't possibly comment. Certainly the story is the driving force, the main reason to see this shooter through.

But what a shame Free Radical couldn't see the future. In fact, it's fairly astonishing *anyone* could totally ignore fundamental console/PC differences without coming over a bit Nostradamus. "And when the port doth reach the shore, the weeping disembarks; the controls upon thy tits shall totally get." How could you not see it coming?

The controls are optimised excellently for a pad's deficiencies. Please follow along: 1. Stamp foot. 2. Roll eyes. Yes, you could plug in a pad, but we have The Mouse. For looking and aiming, there's nothing like it. *Second Sight* uses the mouse/keyboard, but simply maps the pad-based control system onto them.

So you lock on with the right button, then fire with the left. Fine, but (vital) headshots mean panning from the default mid-body aim, at which point you find increasing the mouse sensitivity to maximum – which you had to do to avoid swiping at the mouse mat like a checkout girl with a week's shopping, just to turn around – has had no effect. Aiming movement stays treacle, so as to work with the pad you're not using. What a lot of effort they haven't made.

Swiping like a checkout girl

Target-switching is also glacial – you've crossed the mouse mat and it's barely twitched – so you shove to the edge of your desk and, oh look, the target's flicked to a wastebin a foot to the right. Surfing the thrill of progress, you push further, across the dog who throws you a wounded look like 'you cheap bastard' and dips away and the mouse tumbles and the enemy reaches the switch and the alarm goes off.

So isolate guards at distance and silently, gently, almost lovingly kill them. Explore for alternative, non-confrontational ways through because the camera, which dislikes panning up or down or staying where you put it, won't help you either.

The sorrow! 1. Throw your hands up. 2. Sigh. Despite the telekinetic physics being almost sweetly laughable next to *Half-Life 2*, John Vattic's powers are fun. Enemies are visibly nonplussed by flying tables and colleagues, giving you time to either slip past or murderalise them. They're also entertainingly caricatured and animated, slowing before they stop, looking before they turn and tip-toeing outrageously. Lushly human compared to the robotic norm.

That the two alternating timelines are never confusing, and that the ending's a treat, is impressive. Particularly for a game. Weep, then, that it's not *much* of a game.

STEVE WILLIAMS

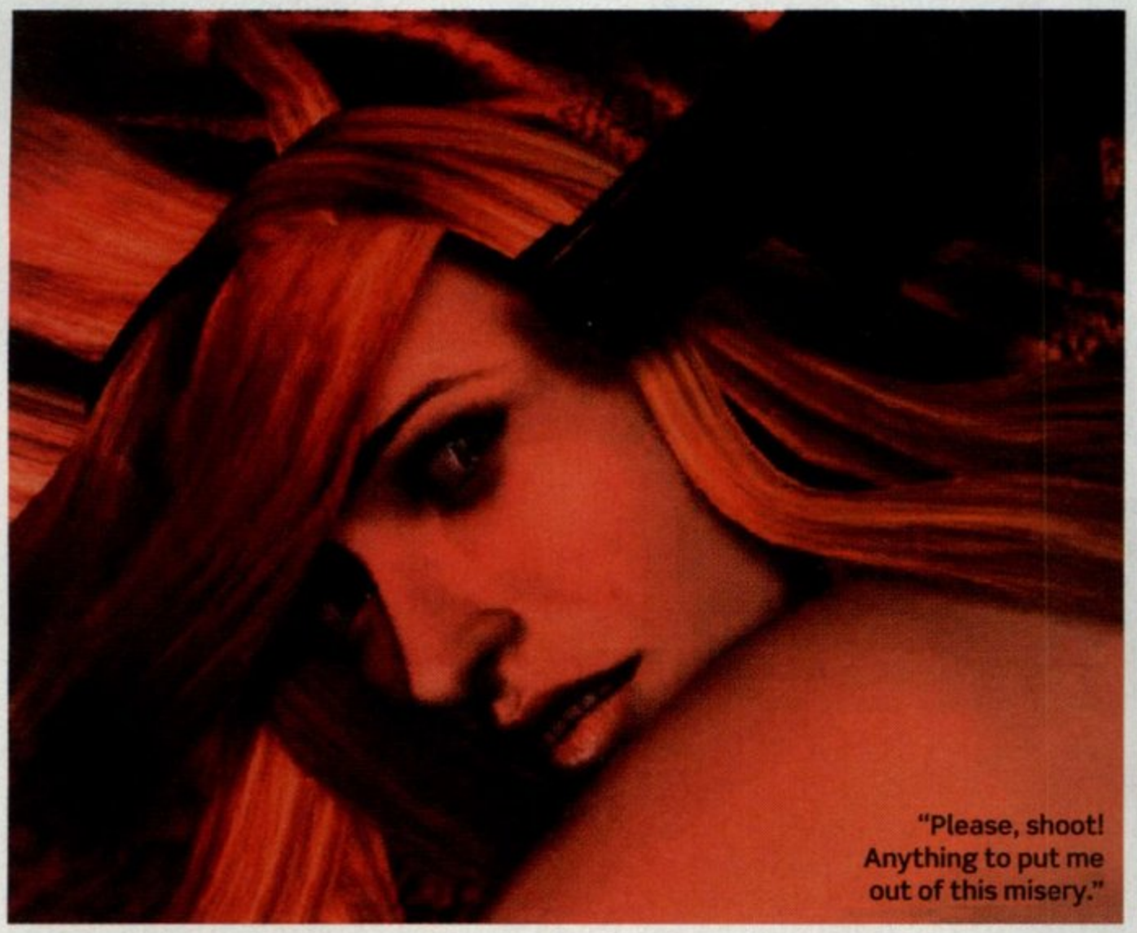
PC GAMES ADDICT Too console-focused, but nice touches

IT'S › Awkward › Well-told › Intriguing

IT'S NOT › Great stealth › Enough fun › Lovingly ported

Clairavoidable **64%**

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Codemasters ■ **Developer** Free Radical ■ **They say** 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card ■ **We say** 2GHz, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card
■ **Multiplayer** None ■ **Link** www.codemasters.co.uk/secondsight ■ **Influenced by** Memento, Splinter Cell ■ **Alternatively** Astrology



CSI: MIAMI

The grating detectives

Previously, on *CSI* Games Reviews: "Oh no, what on earth is going on? I'm being punished for not finding every single scrap of evidence in the game, despite accurately convicting the murderer for his crime!" *Swoosh.* "This acting is so lame I might have to wedge a fork into my face, just to experience a real emotion." *Swish.* "This second game at least removes the ludicrous chastising at the end of the levels." *Swoosh.* "But the stories are still just as bad."

Tonight, on *CSI* Games Reviews: Oh no, it's happening all over again. Anyone who played the second game, *Dark Motives*, will know the bemusement it generated in the player. It was awful. And yet there was still something about it that kept you going, despite it not meriting this whatsoever. This third instalment manages the same mean trick.

It's the same system – you play a rookie investigating murders alongside the desperately poor actors from the TV series. With your bagful of investigative tools, you must click on every pixel in the screen in the hope it will reveal the incriminating fleck of dust, in between choice-free 'interviews' of the myriad suspects. Neither element works to any degree of satisfaction (although it's strangely fulfilling to find fingerprints), and the same crappy engine once more smears perspective beyond all desired limits. It's a mess. And yet, I played it to the bitter end.

CSI: Miami manages the same mean trick

The only explanation can be that it's a murder mystery. At the beginning of each of the five chapters there's a dead body, a murder weapon, and a list of suspects. How could you not find out? Is it testament to the game that you bother? No. The game sucks. It's testament to your training from daytime repeats of 1980s detective shows.

This much more adult-themed triquel would only be worth stumbling upon, for free, on a weeknight, and that's if your TV was broken.

JOHN WALKER

PC GAMER

Distracting, but ultimately frustrating and a bag of bum.

50%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Ubisoft ■ **Developer** 369 Interactive
■ **Multiplayer** None ■ **Link** csimiami.ubi.com ■ **Alternatively** In Memoriam

SPELLFORCE: THE BREATH OF WINTER

The terrible consequences of inter-species love

There seems to be an almost Newtonian law regarding the RTS: namely, that for every title, there shall be a corresponding expansion pack several months later. This law is irrefutable; and so we come to *The Breath of Winter*, companion to sleeper hit *Spellforce: The Order of Dawn*.

The Breath of Winter, like its parent, is host to an interesting amalgamation of RPG and RTS gameplay. The story, as you might expect, is sufficiently filled with Tolkienesque clichés, elven babes and the dragons what love 'em. However, in spite of speculation about what happens after the events of *The Order of Dawn*, *The Breath of Winter* is a parallel spin-off set during the campaign events of the original game. Predictably, its plot involves sojourning to colder parts of the same richly detailed fantasy world of the original.

The Breath of Winter is a parallel spin-off

The learning curve is fairly steep, throwing the player directly into the thick of the game – assuming, and rightly so, that anyone playing *The Breath of Winter* is already familiar with the mechanics. The result is a much faster-paced and challenging experience than the rather plodding, methodical gait of *The Order of Dawn*.

The usual gamut of new enemies, races, items and heroes is at your disposal, but it's the new gameplay modes that add the most dimension to the core *Spellforce* gameplay. The 'Freeplay' mode allows for a multiplayer option for up to three players via internet or LAN where players can collect items and experience on randomized maps, without all that cumbersome questing. The items and experience can then be saved for the single-player campaigns and the PvP mode.

In reality, though, *The Breath of Winter* is simply more of the same, so it could be considered valuable only to those players who couldn't get enough of *The Order of Dawn*, or who are particularly interested in the storyline. *The Order of Dawn* was already pretty large; *Breath of Winter* pads it out a bit further, but contributes very little to gameplay variety, something most other expansion packs for a game as impressive as *Spellforce* tend to offer these days.

MICHELLE STARR

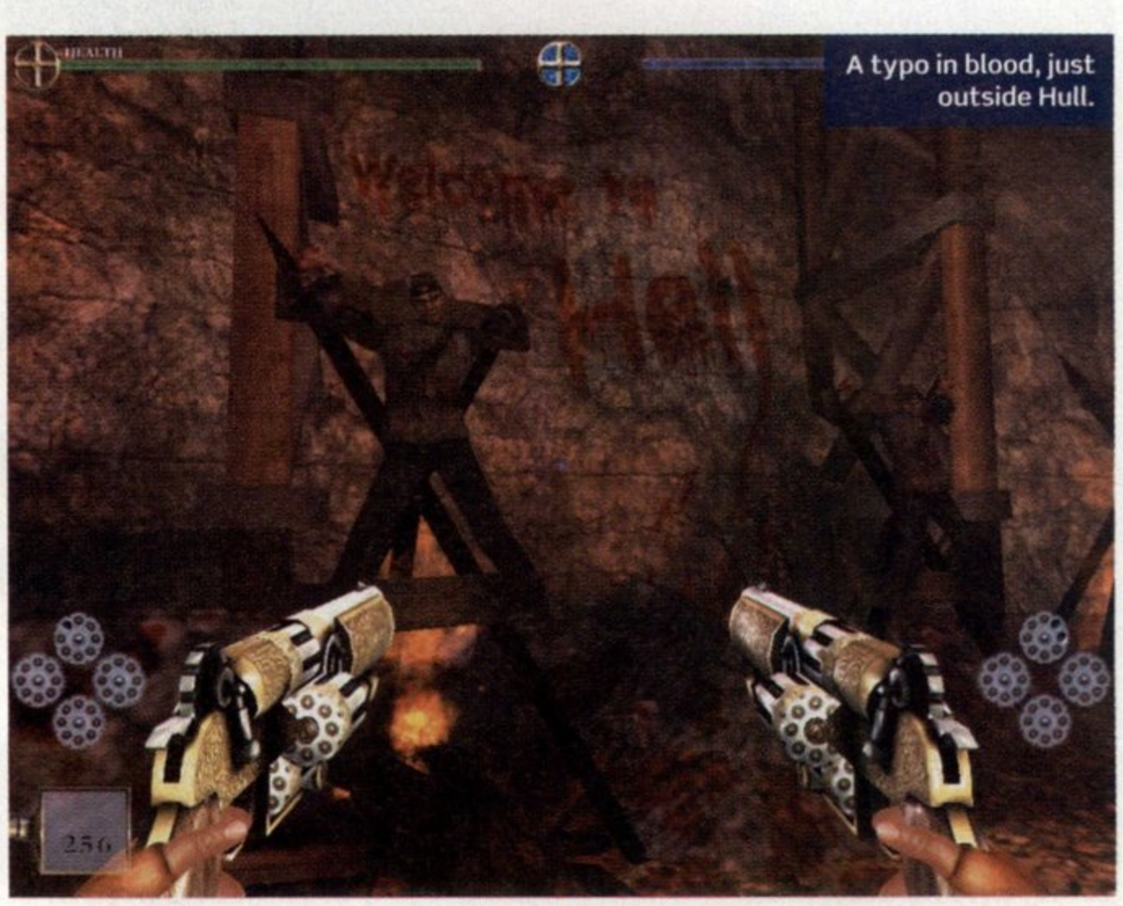
PC GAMES

A quicker pace and a parallel plot is about all this one's got.

69%

■ **Release** Out now ■ **Publisher** Auran ■ **Developer** JoWood Games
■ **Multiplayer** Yes ■ **Link** spellforce.jowood.com ■ **Alternatively** Warcraft III

Even in the Wild West, it pays you to dress in layers.



A typo in blood, just outside Hull.

CELEB

HI, I'M A GAME DEVELOPER

Name Paul Wedgwood, Splash Damage

Credits *Enemy Territory*, *Doom 3* Multiplayer element

My fave game: *Warhammer 40k: Dawn of War*. I'm about halfway through the singleplayer campaign.

My fave mod: Check out Enemy *Territory Fortress* – a mod we worked on before *Splash Damage*. The site is **www.etfgame.com**.

The thing I'm most looking forward to: Playing *WoW* – it's great to own a company, and avoid getting fired for playing at work!

UT2004 MOD

Damnation

Where a river cannot flow free

A self-styled 'steampunk fantasy western' *Damnation* is a staggering example of the creativity and polish the Make Something Unreal contest has inspired in modders. It's a mix of platformer and FPS where you play as one of four Peacemakers – gunfighters with spiritual abilities, such as possessing enemies.

In the third-person mode, you run fast and jump far – especially if you encounter a Spirit Feather that enables very daring jumps, which you can watch in cinematic slow-motion to show how cool you look. In a similarly intelligent piece of design, bits of the scenery from which you can swing, hang, climb or flip share a metallic texture flecked with yellow. You might not even notice it, but you'll instinctively realise when you need to shimmy along a wire or somersault up onto a ledge.

DOWN LOADER
Contest-winning singleplayer platformer for *UT2004*

In FPS mode, your basic armament – the obligatory starting-pistol – is replaced by twin quadruple-barrelled revolvers, with every round accurately tracked by the meticulous HUD. You're also equipped with an Arrow Rifle, whose shafts stick in your enemy until he resembles a hedgehog. Best of all, the Steam Gun has a small monitor displaying whatever you're about to fire a jet of hot vapour at.

Damnation won fourth place in the Non-FPS category of Phase 4 of the Make Something Unreal Contest, but we'd have ranked it higher. There are only three levels, but they'll last a good five hours. And the team are planning to make *Damnation* into a full game so there's more to look forward to.

PC GAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

218Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	www.damnationthegame.com
Discs	On the DVD
Requires	A patched *UT2004*
Ultra-polished platform fun. In hell.	

LET US SPEND YOUR BANDWIDTH

Use the Download Manager to judge download speed, or find the best gaming picks of the month on the DVD.

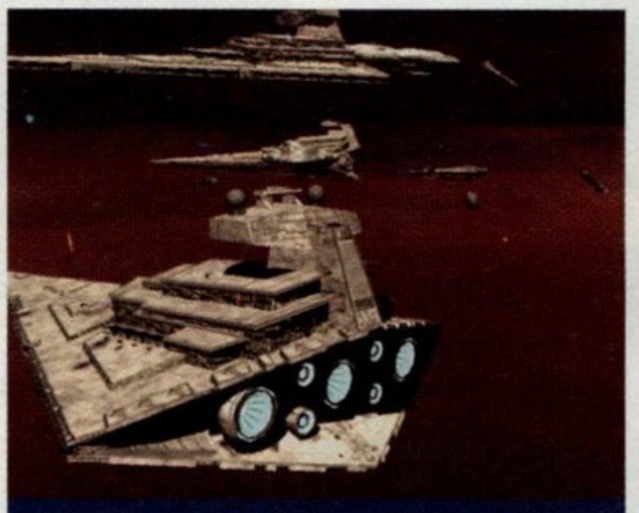
BROADBAND BREEZE ❮ ❯ BROADBAND BREAKER

10Mb	50Mb	150Mb	1Gb
56k friendly	*Modem mare*	*Modem meltdown*	*Nightie night*

HOMEWORLD 2 MOD

Empire Warlords

Be proud of this technological terror



TIE-fighters are OK but the real buzz begins when the Star Destroyers arrive.

Battles can get hairy, so keep the build queue stocked and the researchers busy.

An RTS where squads of buzzing TIE-fighters and X-wings clash, zipping around the giant Star Destroyers and Corellian Cruisers. But while we wait for them to pull that particular egg from the goose that is the Star Wars licence, this mod for *Homeworld 2* will do very nicely .

The latest version includes 80 unique craft, covering classes from fighters, cruisers and auxiliary support ships. The battles are suitably spectacular and as you watch over the fireworks you can't help but picture scenes of the Emperor watching over his fleet in Return of the Jedi.

A singleplayer campaign is in the works, but for now you will need to play in skirmish mode against the AI, using the custom maps provided, to use the mod. It's also worth setting up your games to give each faction the maximum amount of resources available in order to allow for the biggest fleets possible.

PC GAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

147Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	http://warlords.swrebellion.com
Discs	On the DVD
Requires	*Homeworld 2* with the 1.1 patch
***Homeworld 2* is now more essential than ever**	

Super Furry

If you own *Pro Evolution Soccer* on the PC you've got to be introduced to *Wolf*. This man is the king of *PES* updates and he's wasted no time getting to work on *PES4*. His so called 'Furry' option files for the Konami's game are already unleashed. These files do the donkey work of updating the database with all the correct team and league names. It also updates all the squad line-ups with the latest transfers while correcting all those bizarre player names that Konami couldn't get the licence for. Refreshed regularly, version 1.75 was already out as we went to press but you should keep checking **http://pespc-files.soccergaming.com** for the latest release.

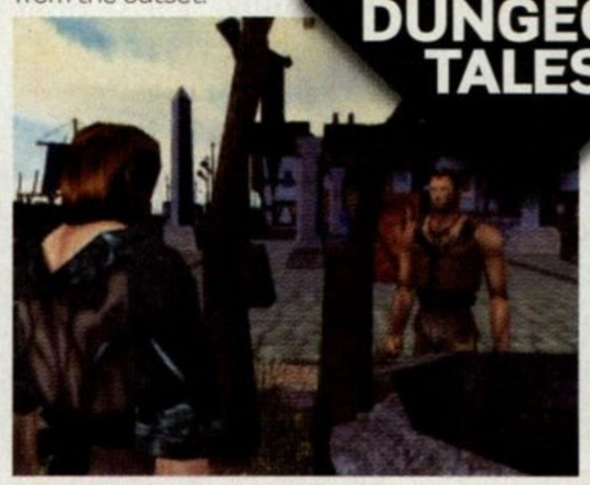
MACHINIMA

NEVERENDING

Why should I download it? It's a new comedy series, using the *NWN* engine, telling a tale of Grayson the Fighter and Peter the Ranger. They're on a quest for fame and fortune that seems doomed from the outset.

DOWN LOADER

DUNGEON TALES



1 MAKE A WISH

The pair raid the city well for beer money. Surely dragons offer a better income?

2 COMING UP SHORT

But the home of a Red Dragon requires a reliable map. Sadly, this map is useless.

3 WANDERLUST

Peter's Ranger skills are tested in the woods. He fails miserably.

4 MAGE MONEY

They find refuge in the town of Galana and hunt for a Wizard to bankroll their quest.

PC GAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

159Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	www.neverendingnights.com
Discs	On the DVD
Requires	Windows Media Player
It's Bill and Ted in the *D&D* universe	

FILE DUMP

Light Bytes

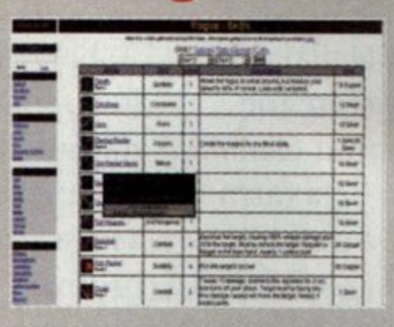
Ross tucks into a dish of Internet bolognese

KOTOR TROOPER SKINS

Just in time for – er – the sequel, how about a mod for *Knights of the Old Republic*? To be frank, all those shiny Sith trooper outfits just aren't Star Warsy enough for me, so this is a great little tweak: less than 1Mb to turn the standard bad guys into kosher '70s icons. The Imperial Stormtrooper outfit is also available to your party as armour pick-ups. Now all you need is posh bird with funny hair to ask if you're a bit short to be a stormtrooper. Make sure to show it to your Xbox-playing mates and ask them if it works on the big black brick. **www.lucasfiles.com**

ORISINAL AND ORIGINAL

Don't ask me where the name comes from – I've no idea. But I do know this: when I'm in the mood for some simple web games, this is where I've been going for years. There are dozens of very simple Flash games here with one thing in common: a rare sense of beauty and restraint amidst the morass of the internet. I particularly recommend *Starry Night* and *Cats*. If the bang-shooty stress of *Half-Life 2* has just become too much, go here, and make sure you turn up the volume for maximum calming effect. **www.ferryhalim.com/orisinal**



THOTTBOT

Excuse me while I geek out for a while: this is the ultimate site for anyone playing *World of Warcraft*, and almost entirely useless to those who don't. Not only does it list every imaginable fact about the game itself – quests, skills, recipes, weapons, NPCs, locations, monsters – it even features a database of players themselves. Apparently, this information is collected by spies within the game itself who take a 'snapshot' of players. I even found myself in there. Sinister. A useful comment system means it gets updated quickly. **www.thottbot.com**

HL2 DONE QUICK

Sure, you've completed it three times now. But have you completed it in less than three hours? There are some people (with, we can only assume, unsatisfied girlfriends) for whom speed is the only objective, and any kind of shortcut or skip is fair game in their quest. At the time of writing, the best time is two hours 15 minutes – but our resident speed freak Tom, reckons he can break the two-hour mark. I reckon he's all talk and no trousers. See the single-minded pros at work on their hobby here: **www.planetquake.com/sda/other/HalfLife2.html**

DOOM 3 MOD

Pathway Redux

Cry for your mummy

This first, fully single-player mod for *Doom 3* is based on the classic 1993 Bungie title, *Pathways into Darkness*. A kind of FPS meets *Tomb Raider*, it casts you in the role of a special operative, charged with a mission to detonate a nuclear device inside an ancient pyramid – the home of an awakening alien force that's got some rather nasty plans for mankind.

Although there's only an hour of play, *Redux*'s tomb will have your skin crawling just as effectively as any Demon-filled Mars outpost. The guts of the Pyramid are suitably dark and dank, the suspense and unrest fed by your headlamp that lights your way somewhat sporadically as you run through the tomb's interiors. You'll hear the menace first, then, as you turn, your lamp with come to rest on the corridor in front and you'll be face to face with the horror.

The Shades are simply terrifying. Floating fiery demonic heads that whine menacingly and stalk you relentlessly throughout the labyrinth; crashing through ceilings, spewing deadly bolts of electricity your way. You can comfortably outrun them but, when you take a wrong turn in the complex pyramid corridors, you know you have to turn back into their path. It leaves you feeling like a demoralised Pac-Man without a power pill in sight.

If you're entering a maze always make sure you're equipped with a bloody big gun.

PCGAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

13Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	www.planethalflife.com/blended/pathways
Discs	On the DVD
Requires	Patched version of *Doom 3*
A short, sharp, shocker	

DOWN LOADER OPEN TOMB

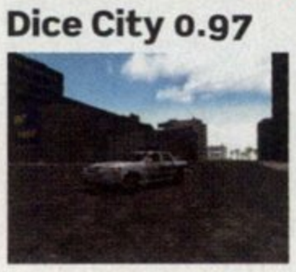
Aren't pyramids burial chambers for ancient kings? We're sure he ain't no king.

The worst thing Lara Croft had to face was a slavering T-Rex...

UPDATE

ESSENTIAL MODS

Dice City 0.97



Battlefield Vietnam
246Mb full version
www.planetbattlefield.com/dicecity
A new round of enhancements and bug fixes for a teamplay mod that pitches SWAT forces against the Drug Cartels in *Battlefield* cityscapes.

SAS Into the Lions Den 2.1

UT 2004
479 Mb full version
www.sas.jolt.co.uk
The counter-terrorism teamplay mod gets a new sabotage mode where teams aim to destroy multiple targets.

Sands of War 1.4

Half-Life
77.6 Mb with patch
http://sandsofwar.simgames.net
A Middle East conflict mod using the original *Half-Life* engine. Influenced by *Desert Combat* as teams battle for possession of flags around the map.

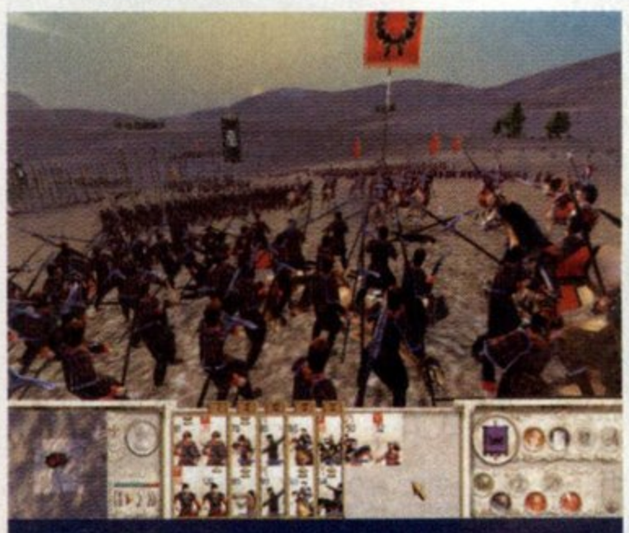
Calling all mods, indy games, machinima, shareware... Send your links to:
dan@derwenthoward.com.au

ROME: TOTAL WAR MOD

China: Total War

Build Tiananmen Square: 10% bonus to public order

The first modders to create playable code for *Rome: Total War* are the 30+ clever-fingered folk behind *China: Total War*. This mod, out in beta form at the time of writing, adds a new campaign putting you in charge of the Ts'in Empire's invasion of Asia Minor. The Parthian faction is replaced, giving you three towns in what is now Iraq.



Sharp new unit models indicate the amount of work that's gone into this impressive mod.

There are plenty of new units, including crossbow-armed foot and mounted troops. The Chinese faction favours long-range missile units, with access to chariots, elephants and rather ordinary infantry – except the morale-sapping suicide squads.

The model skins and animation are exemplary, which makes using the Ts'in faction a pleasure. There's still work to be done on the campaign side and interface, but it functions well and is highly recommended. We can't run it on the discs due to the impressive opening video of some film footage, but it's a fantastic download.

PCGAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

46Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	http://stratcommandcenter.com/chinamod
Discs	Not with that copyrighted movie intro
Requires	*Rome: Total War*, 1.1 patch
Impressive but there's even more to come	

Padding up

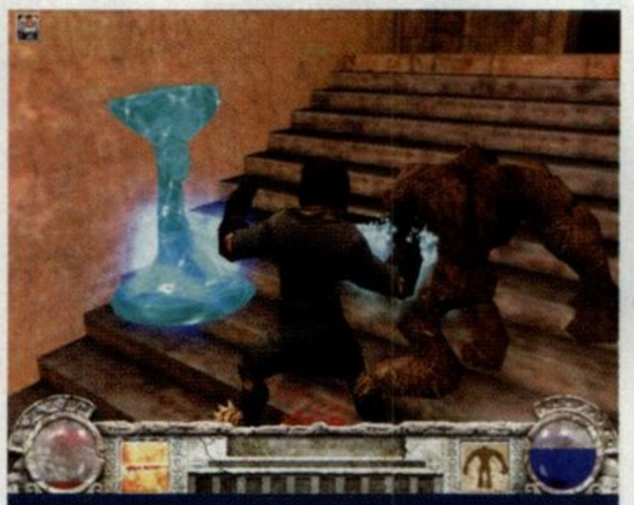
The Padman's been at work again this month releasing an update for his genius *Quake III* mod *World of Padman*. It's best described as *Quake* meets *Toy Story*, with miniature worlds, cartoon models and weapons. There's also a killer of a game mode that sees teams fighting it out for paint cartridges, teleporting to the 'spray room' to emblazon the walls with their logo for points. This update vastly improves the single-player bot support while this month has seen an unmissable new map released. *Padshop* is based in a games shop, and gives you the chance to fight it out on the shelves among the game boxes, and on the counter alongside a copy of PCGA.

DUNGEON SIEGE MOD

Dungeon Siege: Elemental

Get Bible bashing

The wand is mightier than the sword so be sure to harness your magical powers.



It's always handy to conjure a golem to fight alongside you when the going gets tough.

Need an excuse to dust off *Dungeon Siege*? This single-and multiplayer total conversion is true its hack and slay roots, but transplants the slashery to a 'Biblepunk' world set in a warped Judea, full of beasts and sandalled sorts waiting for a hero. Cue you (Yay!) as a slave in the catacombs, leaping on to the bottom rung of the hero ladder and scaling up over ten hours of play. Three playable races are on offer in this final version: the man/tiger warrior joined by a she-warrior and the giant mantis.

More subtle refinements have also been made such as an upgraded system to restore health with the captured spirits of slain foes. The complex skill tree also means there's a vast range of characters available, with ten branches to explore, divided into three strands, enabling your character to improve by perfecting techniques for ranged and melee combat and unique skills based on your race and skills associated with harnessing the powers of the elements.

PCGAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

477Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	http://the-elemental.net
Discs	On the DVD
Requires	Patched version of *Dungeon Siege*

An adventure of Biblical proportions

BG2 MOD

BG2: Keto

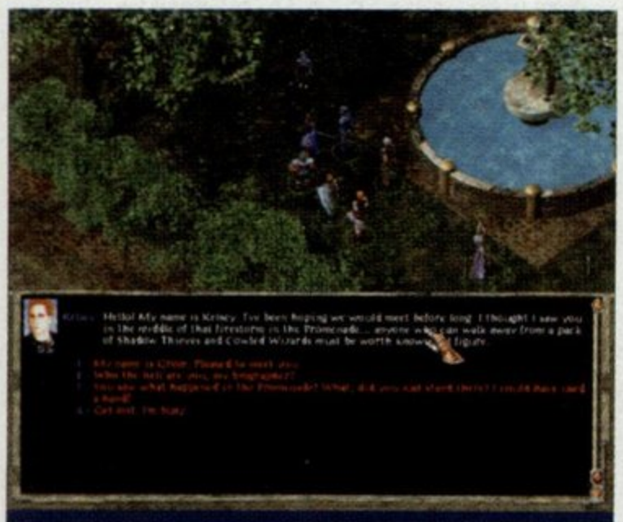
Character-building stuff

DOWN LOADER NPC MOD

Despite the game's code being a messy hotchpotch, it's testament to the determined RPG fraternity that a number of *Baldur's Gate II* mods have been successfully produced. The best can be found at **pocketplane.net**, and *Keto* has to be one of our favourites.

The mod essentially comprises a new NPC who is able to join your party, complete with bags of written and recorded dialogue. The titular Keto is a feisty bard with a taste for booze and tall tales. She can be picked up at the Five Flagons as soon as you enter Athkatla, though you don't need to start a new game for her to be available.

While you're at it, consider installing Kelsey too. He's another party-seeking NPC who can be found in the Government District.He's not quite as colourful as Keto, but they have a good rapport, and together display the first-class creative abilities of the *Baldur's Gate II* community.



Both Keto and Kelsey can be found hanging around in Athkatla, ready to join your party.

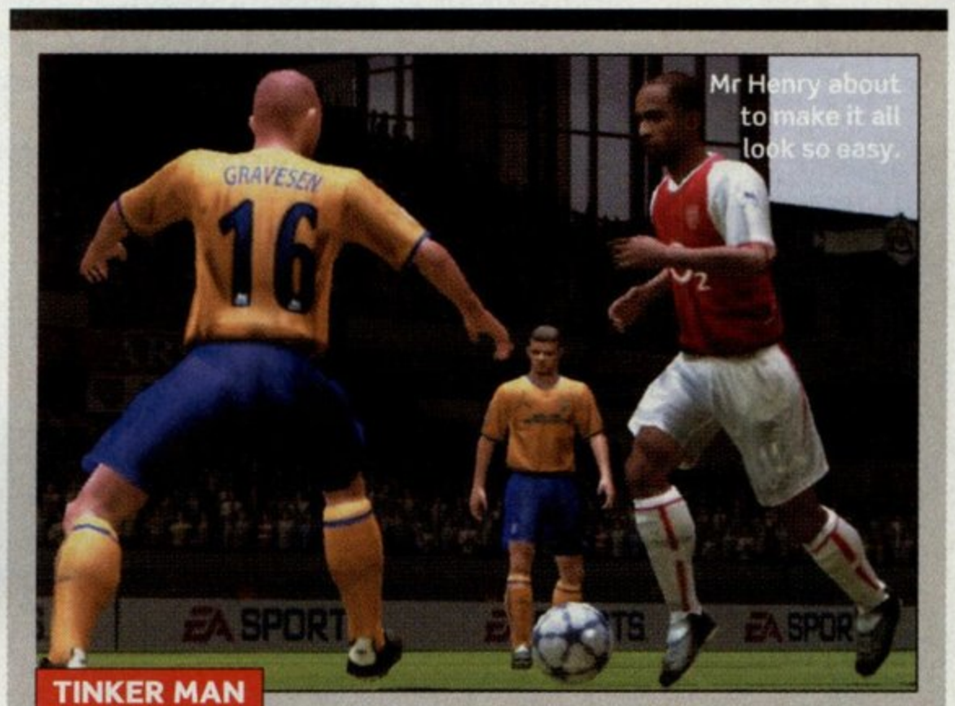
PCGAMES DOWNLOAD MANAGER

18Mb

DATA FLOW

Link	www.pocketplane.net/keto
Discs	No
Requires	Patched *BGII* plus *Throne of Bhaal*

Well-written and very welcome extra content



TINKER MAN

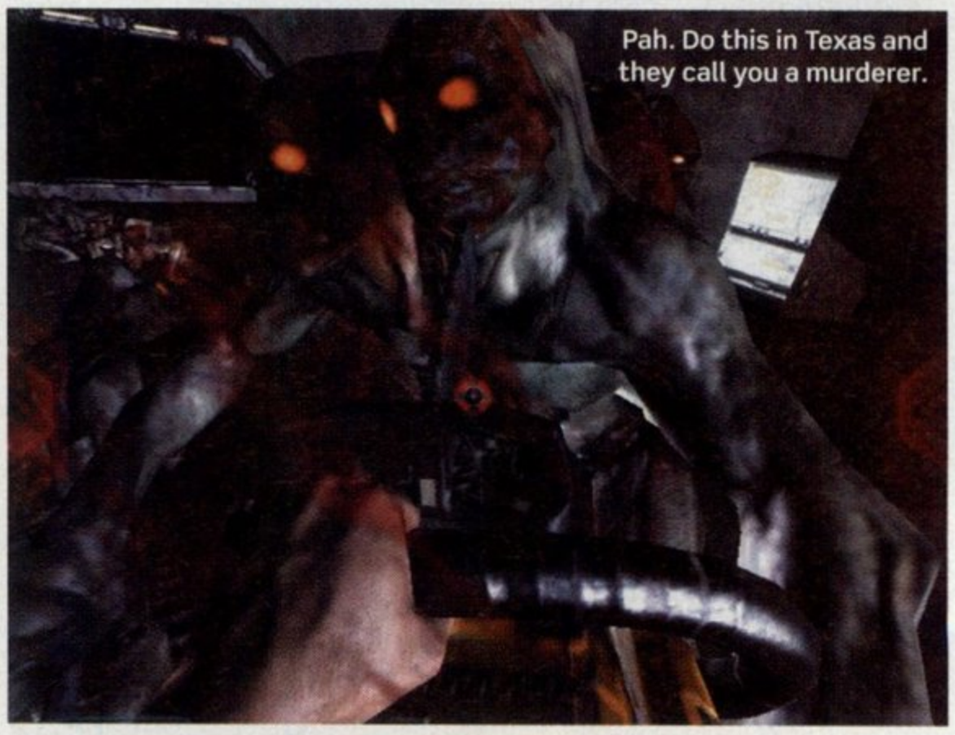
Fifa 2005 Files

The subs are warming up...

Your team draws and gains a point to move you up the table, but it's not as good as a win. Or they win earning three valuable points, but didn't score enough goals. Football fans are never satisfied. And though *FIFA 2005* may be the best version yet, lavished with uncannily accurate player phizogs, if the fans can change things for the better then that's exactly what they're going to do.

EA may not have released the official *FIFA 2005* Creation Centre editor yet, but that hasn't stopped a bunch of fanatical modders dipping into the code to shake it up a tad. Ranging from simple graphics upgrades like portrait packs and data updates to keep your games bang up to date, right through to third-party patches. There are plenty of files pouring through the turnstiles and here's our pick of the bunch so far.

THE SUB	THE IMPACT
GRAPHICS UPGRADE	Yes, *FIFA* already looks as flashy as a footballers' wives brunch but there's no harm in a quick touch-up. This patch pops referees and linesmen into your matches plus new balls, boots and advertising boards. ftp://ftp.futurenet.com/pub/dailyradar/pc/FGU.exe
SWEETPATCH	The transfer window helped EA get most of their team sheets up to date but a few slipped through the net. This patch puts that right, updating rosters for European and 21 national teams, too. ftp://ftp.futurenet.com/pub/dailyradar/pc/sweetpatchRosterEp3.exe
CHANT RAPTOR	*FIFA*'s crowd noises are better than ever and this tool lets you improve them further. It helps you import your own crowd chants into the game as mp3's so get your dictaphone ready for Match of the Day. ftp://ftp.futurenet.com/pub/dailyradar/pc/chantraptor-build10.exe
MANAGER PACK	*FIFA 2005's* expanded career mode went down well but the manager portraits looked like as bunch of nobodies. Drop this pack into your game for a choice of some real-life manager faces. ftp://ftp.futurenet.com/pub/dailyradar/pc/RealManagersPhotosFaces2005.exe
SEVIX PATCH	This patch morphs the CPU into a genius. He'll now make substitutions, rely less on the wings for attacks and when he lets fire from distance he's now much more likely to find the net. ftp://ftp.futurenet.com/pub/dailyradar/pc/Sevix2005ENGv1_1.exe


Pah. Do this in Texas and they call you a murderer.

MOD NEWS

We're going to be more *Doom*ed than ever

DOOM 3

Last Man Standing

They're coming out of the goddamn walls

This is your last stand. Imps are pouring through the door on the left, while slugs worm their way through the vent in the corner. Two team-mates are dead, another is a mere faltering heartbeat within a crumpled body at your feet. You're alone in this hell with just a handful of shotgun rounds to fire and seconds to live. But if being the last man standing isn't always a prize worth fighting for, this forthcoming *Doom 3* mod certainly is.

Far from a total conversion, *Last Man Standing* will simply take id's environments and build closed, claustrophobic arenas, with demons oozing through every imaginable orifice. You're going to sink eventually; the only question is how long you can swim? "We're aiming to incite panic in the players," says mod leader Michael Tomaino, menacingly.

Demons oozing through every orifice

Thankfully, you won't always be alone. The mod will have cooperative play as well as single-player, which will mean you can put your life on the line alongside your virtual brothers in arms. "We'll add more monsters to the map depending on how many players there are," warns Tomaino.

An old favourite, the double-barrelled shotgun, will return, upgraded for the job at hand alongside a 'plasmathrower', which Tomaino describes, unsurprisingly, as "a flamethrower that launches bursts of blue plasma".

We'll also be able to 'hack' doors to seal them off - making maps dynamic as a matter of course. The onus, however, will be on the team-mates, who must fight desperately to defend the hacker while he closes the entry points. Think of all the nightmare scenes in Aliens: doors being sealed with seconds to spare as xenomorphs throw their bodies against metal. As in Cameron's movie, players can also deploy sentry bots and turrets to pin the beasts in corridors.

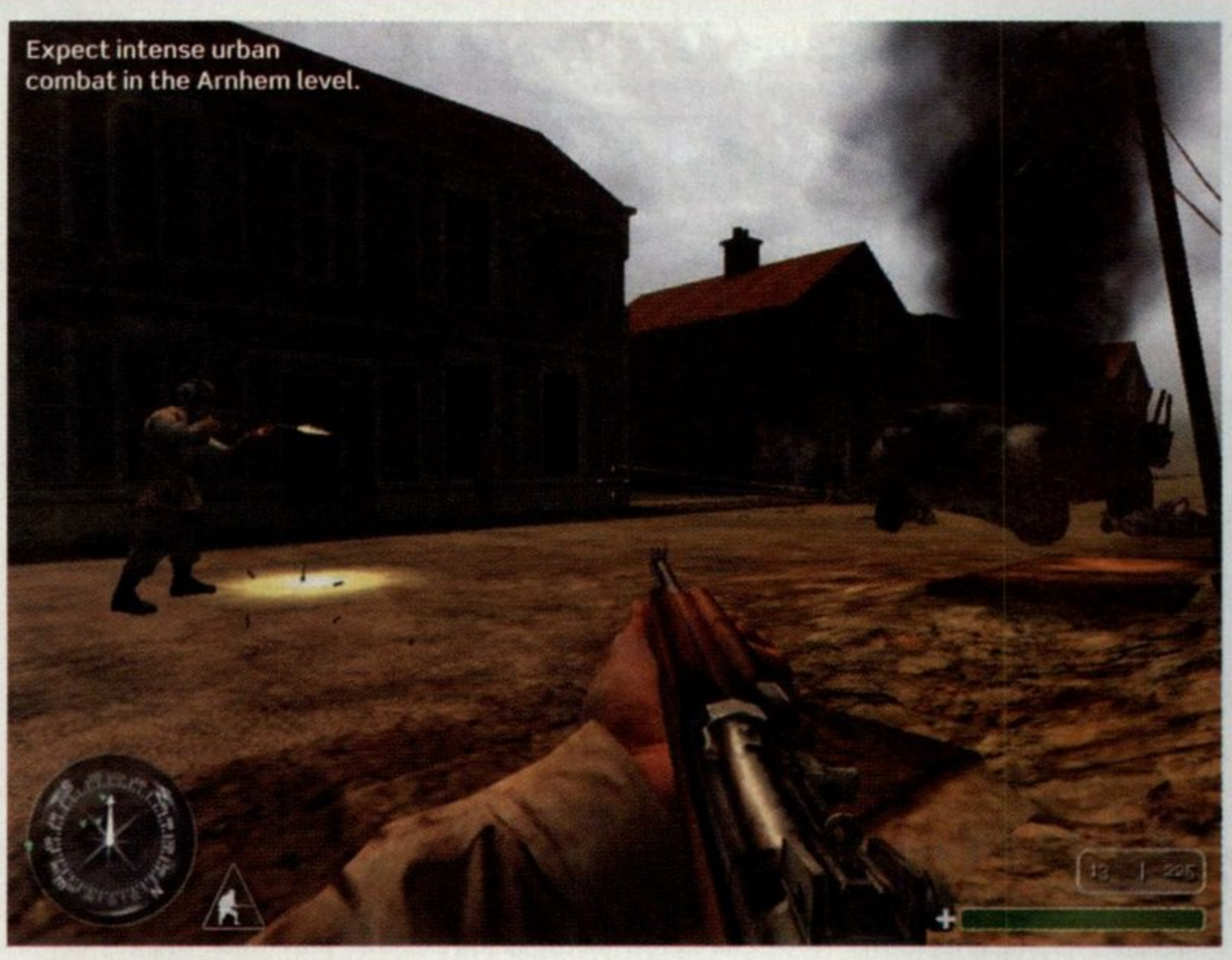
In the primary game (singleplayer or co-op), your task is simply to stay alive and waste a designated number of psycho-morphs. In the competitive mode, the stream of monsters never ends, and the last man standing is the winner by default. A third mode currently being debated by the team will involve players competing in a suicide mission to rack up kills – with a ticking timebomb strapped to their torso. Death is inevitable, but then *Last Man Standing* is all about going out with a bang – with a grin plastered across your chops .

Cut everyone's legs off and you will be, quite literally, the last man standing.

PC GAMES README

DATA FLOW

Type Single and multiplayer
Link http://lms.d3files.com
Percentage complete 70%



CALL OF DUTY

Operation Market Garden

A stroll down Hell's highway

Call of Duty was real enough. The frenzy of bullets and sense-shocking explosions erupting around our ears had us ducking below the carnage ravaging our monitors. We've licked the virtual shrapnel wounds since then, but it seems that still wasn't enough for some. The Benelux Development Team (BDT) are striving for an even greater sense of realism with *Operation Market Garden*.

MOD NEWS
A MOD TOO FAR?

Effectively an add-on to the original game, this singleplayer mod refuses to skim the surface of the infamous WWII op, attempting instead to portray the scale of the event, and the sheer desperation felt by those involved.

The mod will recapture the events of the nine-day struggle by creating 26 levels built across ten key locations. From the early push over the Dutch border to the bitter – and ultimately doomed – battle at Arnhem, each mission will portray the operation from a different perspective. "You'll play a 101st Airbourne securing the village of Son, then you'll be playing the role of a British Airbourne defending Hotel Hartenstein," explains BDT's Jeroen Deijkers. This particular scenario will find you dug in, clinging to your defensive position while under fire from the SS Panzer Division, who will snipe you mercilessly from treetops while lobbing a constant rain of grenades your way.

Based in Holland, the team is ideally placed to research both Oosterbeek and Arnhem. "We want to create the places as they were, so the player *can* actually relive the battle," explains Deijkers. "*Call of Duty* is spread over Europe, over five years. Our mod is based in an area no more than 100km squared, over less than two weeks, so our goal is historical correctness."

The obsessive pursuit of authenticity will mean the blood and gore will also flow more readily, with new weapons like the Vickers machinegun to help spill it. Fresh ingredients will also be added to the multiplayer element that's in the works. For now, though, the focus is on the ambitious single-player campaign, and the quest to make the *Call of Duty* war more vivid than ever.

PCGAMES README

DATA FLOW

Type	Single and multiplayer
Link	http://omg.esgnserver.de
Percentage complete	60%

HALF-LIFE 2

Forsaken

Three's a crowd

Happy New Year? Make the most of it. According to multiplayer *Forsaken*, we'll be scratching an existence in the fallout of a viral epidemic by 2009. London and New York will be mere shells. Three factions squabble over the scraps. Choose between the technologically advanced but greedy Governors; the resourceful resistance Civilians, who rely on stealth; or you could join the Religious. A sect of fanatics bent on finishing off mankind altogether.

An objective-based mode will pit all three factions against each other. Picture the Civilians trying to capture a water tanker while the Governors transport it to a given location, and the Religious maniacs try to blow the lot to kingdom come.

PCGAMES README

DATA FLOW

Type	Multiplayer
Link	www.forsaken-game.com
Percentage complete	10%

BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH

MOD ROUND-UP

It only takes a sniff of a new engine to get the *Command & Conquer* modders moving. Derelict Studios have announced that their renowned WWII mod for *C&C Generals*, *Blitzkrieg*, will enjoy a third incarnation on *BfME*. There are already some rather fetching unit models at **www.derelictstudios.net/blitz3**.

Another popular RTS theme, sci-fi, will feature in *Burning Sky*. Think *Starcraft* with a possible fourth faction (yet to be decided). The site (**www.herrr-der-biere.de**) is German only right now, so phrase books out if you want to know more. Finally, if *Rome: Total War* didn't moisten your toga quite as much as you'd hoped, you can look forward to *Rise of Rome* (**http://rome.atomicwienerdog.com**) which is promising the inclusion of mythological powers as bonuses in multiplayer, plus a full singleplayer campaign, using *BfME*'s living world map.

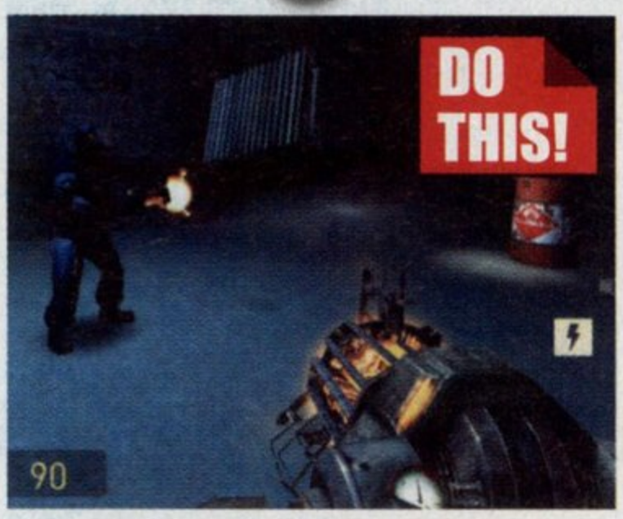
MOD-MAKING AND LEVEL DESIGN MADE EASY

How to make a death match level for *Half-Life 2*

BY HENRIK LARSSON

D-I-Y

Bash out your own levels with *HL2*'s Hammer editor



WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

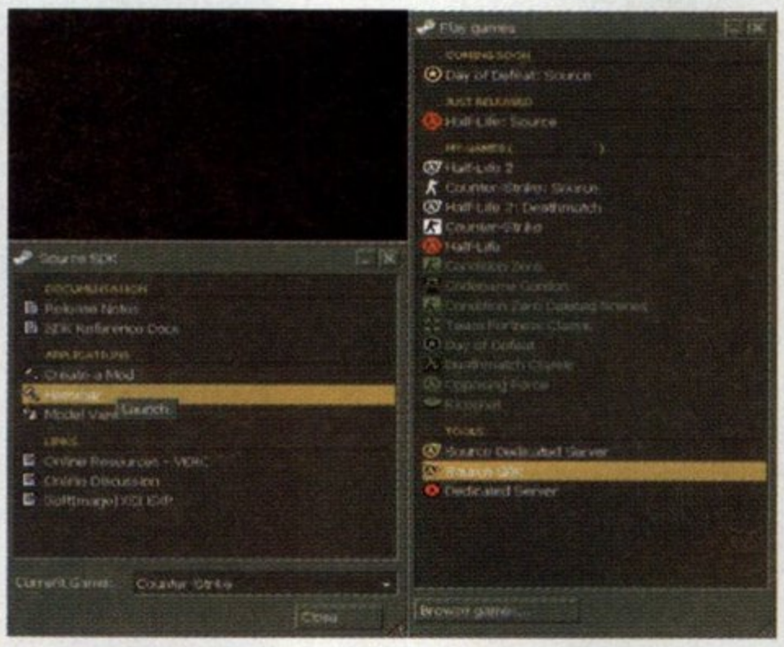
Skill Easy
Time 2-4 hours

WHAT WILL I NEED?

- A copy of *Half-Life 2*
  Come on, you *must* have
- The Source SDK
  Download via your Steam account
- Our sample map for reference
  On the disc >Resources

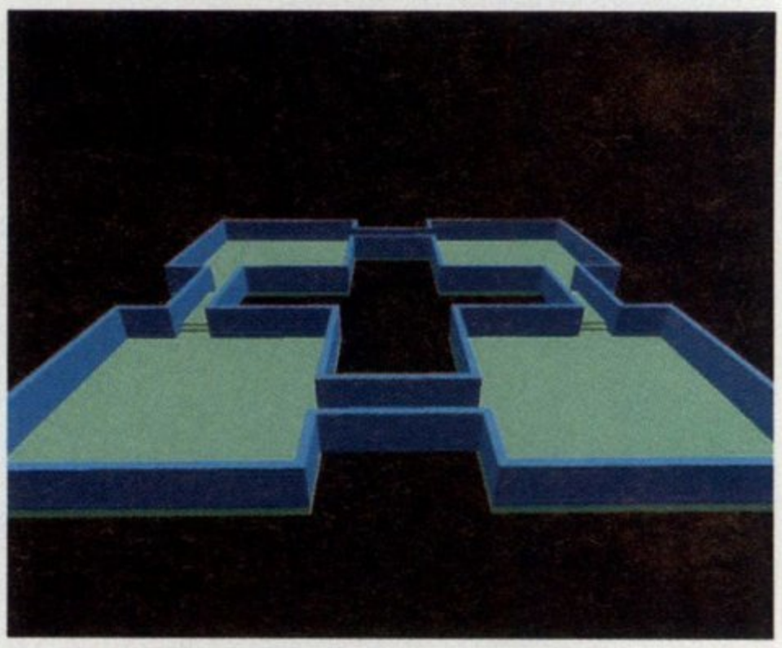
PCGAMES RESOURCE HARVESTER

- **Official documentation and guides**
  www.valve-erc.com/srcsdk
- **Guides, maps, mods, models and more**
  www.hl2files.com
- **Guides and Source engine news**
  http://hl2world.com
- **Community and guides**
  www.snarkpit.com



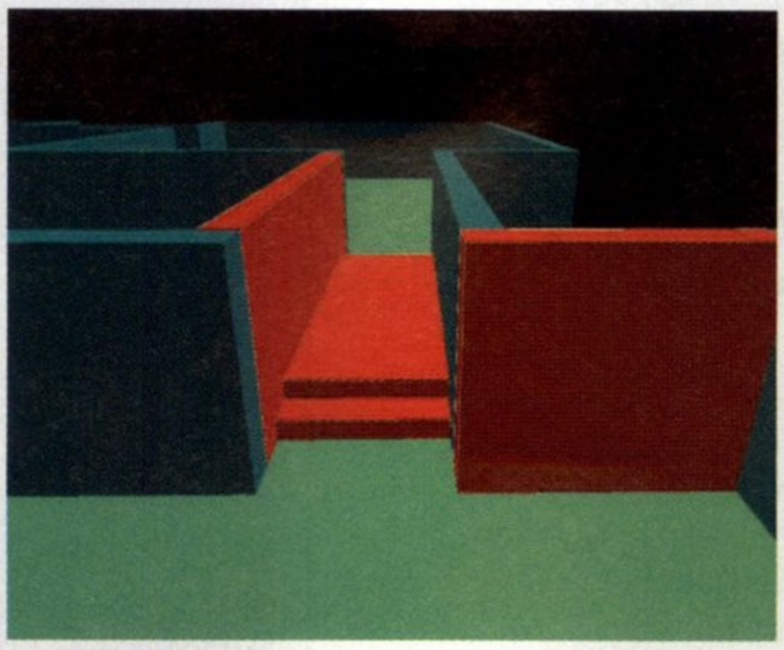
01 IF I HAD A HAMMER

To start the Hammer editor, open Steam's 'Play Games' dialogue box. In there, double-click the Source SDK. The SDK tools will then load. Hammer is the program that you want to fire-up to begin making deathmatch levels for *Half-Life 2*. Model Viewer is, as the name suggests, a program to view models for *Half-Life 2* and mods for it. The links given below left are good resources for finding more information about the editor and *Half-Life 2* modding.



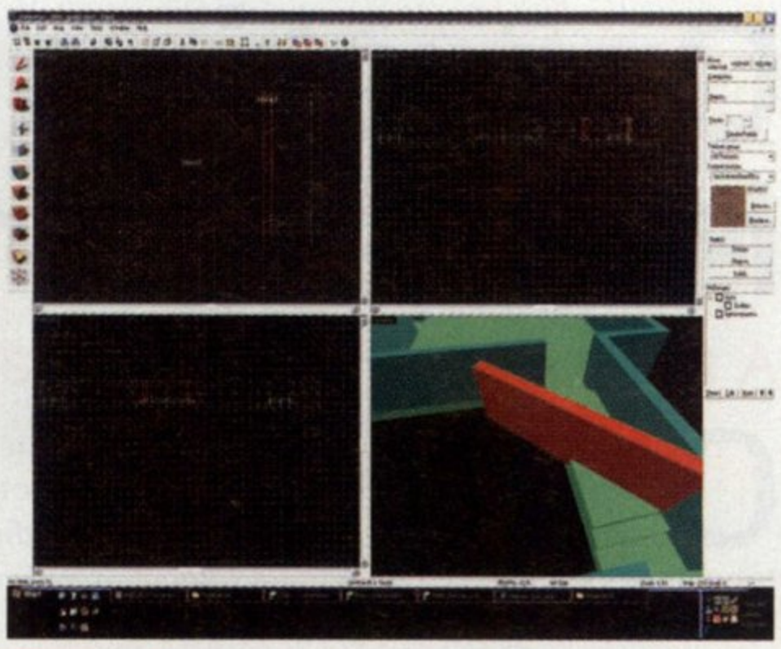
02 CREATING BRUSHES

Brushes are the building-blocks of your levels. The Block Tool (Shift + B), is the tool you use to create cubes and cylinders. To create a brush, simply drag a square in any of the 2D views, and it will create an outline for the brush itself. Make the outline about the size you want it to be and position it as you like, then press Enter to turn the outline into a real brush. You can always resize the brush afterwards, so it's not vital to get it right the first time.



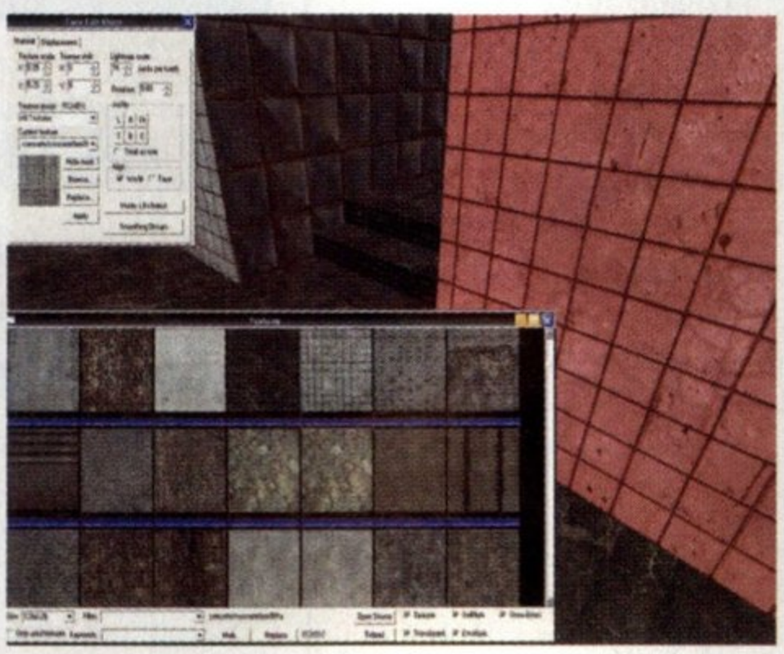
03 SELECTION AND NAVIGATION

The Selection Tool (Shift + S) allows you to select brushes, models or entities. Simply left click in any view. Ctrl + left click will allow you to select as many brushes as you want. To fly around in a 3D view, hover with your mouse over it, and press Z – you will be able to fly around in the view as if you were spectating a game.You can drag a selection box if you hold down the left mouse button and drag. Press Enter to accept the selection.



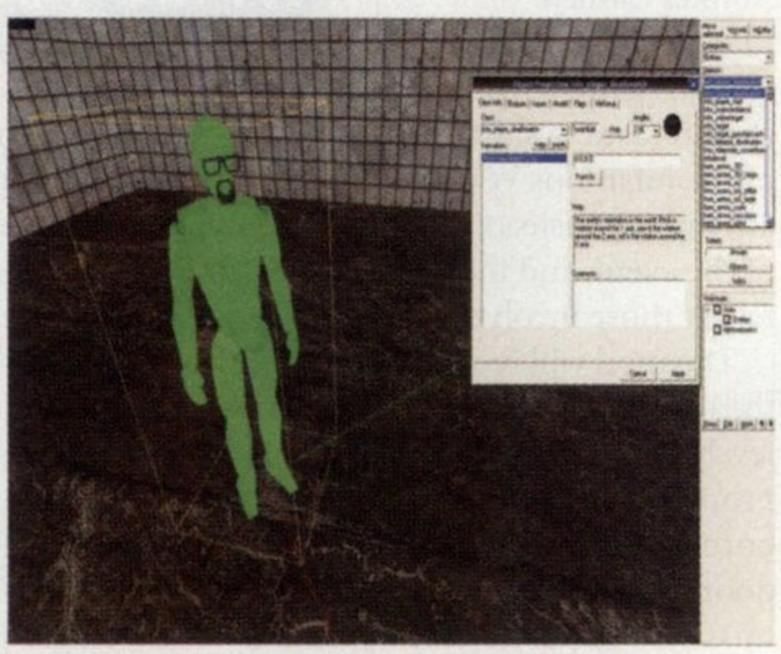
04 MODIFYING GEOMETRY

To scale a brush all you have to do is use the Selection Tool and left click a brush, then drag the edges to scale it. To rotate an object, use the Selection Tool and left click inside an object already selected. Left click inside it again, and the corners will change to circles. You can now rotate it by left clicking and moving the circles. Hold down Shift to snap it 150 degrees at a time. To skew the brush, left click it again and then move the corners.



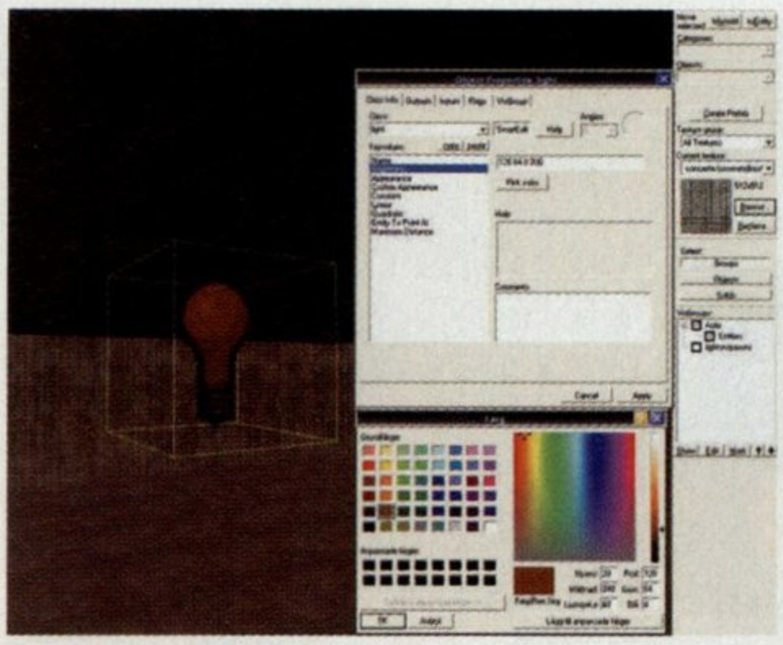
05 TEXTURING

'Toggle Texture Application' (Shift + A) is the tool you use to put a material on a brush. To change the texture of one side of a brush, use the tool then select the side of the brush. To change the texture on *all* sides of a brush, select the brush first, then use the tool to change texture. When you are browsing your textures, you can filter out words, a good example is the word 'crate', which will list you all the textures that have 'crate' in their names.



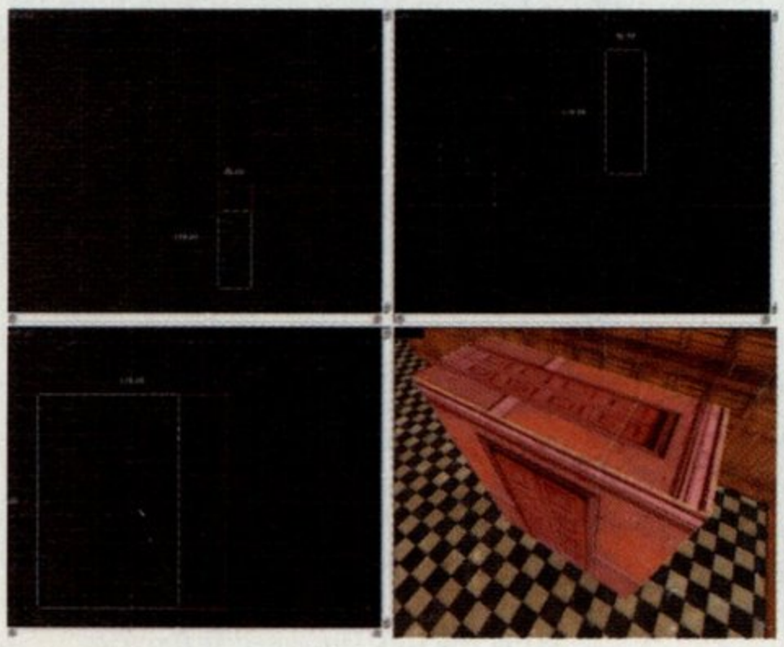
06 SPAWNING POINTS

Next up are the Player Spawns – use the Entity Tool (Shift + E) to create them. The ones used for DeathMatch maps are called 'info_player_deathmatch'. Select one in the drop-down menu, then place it in the 3D view with a left click, or in a 2D view by first left clicking in it and then pressing Enter. You can rotate it to change the way the player will face, the same way as you would rotate a brush or any other object. Don't place the spawns too close to each other.



07 LIGHTS

Lights are also created using the Entity Tool, this time choosing the entity 'light'. When it is placed, double left click it, or right click > Properties, and you can change the colour of the light and also apply some nice effects. 'Brightness' is the colour, 'Appearance' determines if the light should be irregular, like a broken light or a candle. In the Flags dialogue you can set the light to be dark initially, and then turned on with a switch, for example.



09 CUTTING

When you want to cut brushes into pieces the Clipping Tool (Shift + X) will come in handy. Left click to drag out a line to cut. The red side of the line will be cut off, if you would like to change the side of the line that should be cut off, press Shift + X, or the Clipping Tool button. If you do that once more you will turn both sides white, that means that both of the sides will be saved, neither will be deleted after the cut is done, it will split into two brushes.

11 IMPORTING PROPS

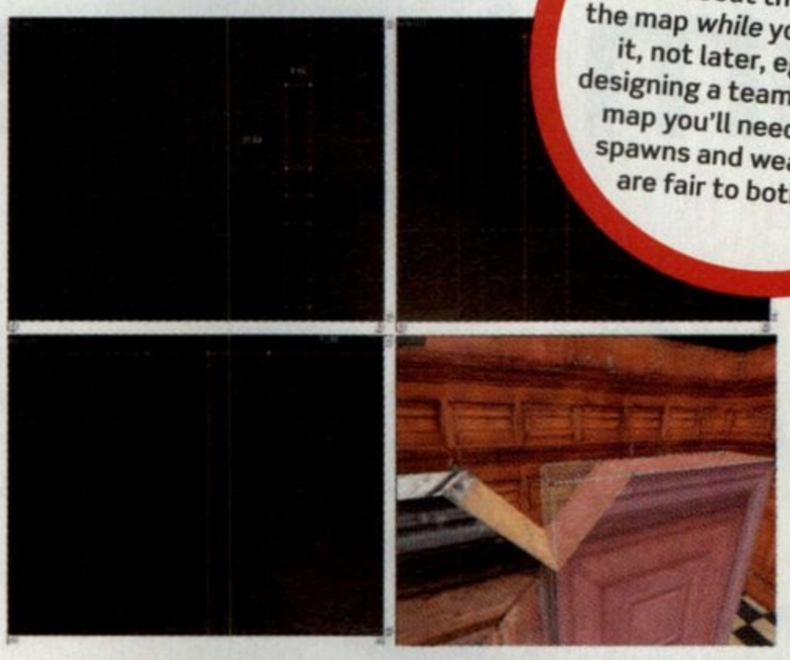
Decorating your levels is important, but some stuff is just too hard to make within the Hammer editor, and should be modelled separately in a third party 3D application. To import such models, create a 'prop_static' entity for objects that don't move or use physics, or 'prop_dynamic' for those that do. Enter the properties of the entity and browse for the model on the 'World Model' keyvalue. For more information on modelling try www.3dbuzz.com.

08 WEAPONS

Weapon entities begin with the 'weapon_' prefix, such as the shotgun: 'weapon_shotgun'. You can't change the default ammo, so you should place the specific ammunition for the gun somewhere nearby, the prefix is 'item_ammo_' for most of the ammunition. Some ammo, however, is different, shotgun ammo for example is 'item_box_buckshot'.

INSIGHT

Think about the balance of the map *while* you're creating it, not later, eg, if you're designing a team deathmatch map you'll need to ensure spawns and weapon drops are fair to both teams.



10 VERTEX MANIPULATION

For more advanced geometry modifications, you will need to move the corners of the brushes, or 'verticies', around. This can be done using the Vertex Tool (Shift + V) when you have a brush selected. You can now drag the mouse in a 2D view to make a selection, and press Enter when holding the mouse over a 2D-view to accept the selection. Left click to move the verticies. To accept the changes made to the brush use the Selection Tool (Shift + S).

12 COMPILING

Finally, you need to compile your map into a BSP file. Use the 'Run Map' button to compile your map. Make sure that you put all settings in the dialogue on 'Normal' and that you check the box 'Don't run the game after compiling'. Move the compiled BSP file into the *Half-Life 2* 'maps' directory. Start *Half-Life 2*, and ensure the console is activated via Options. Activate the console with the tilde key, then enter 'Map mapname' in the console.

Design Law Debunked

Not a rule "A game should have replay value"

Dave Morris is lead designer at Elixir

Back in the day, thanks to a craze begun by Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson, just about every game designer in the country wrote a few multiple-choice gamebooks.

The standard structure was that there would be at least two different major routes through the adventure, with many small side-branches.

Supposedly this was to give replayability. Those gamebooks were heavily story-based, though, which meant that the second time out you were covering many of the same plot twists. Inevitably as you neared the end you'd be visiting the same locations again too.

Nonetheless, with gamebooks it made some sense. People did replay them. But nowadays, given that most people don't even bother to finish a videogame the first time through, is it worth putting in extra branches for replayability?

Multiple branches are not, of course, the only way to make a game replayable. You can have an apparently linear structure where each level provides the player with a variety of options – sneak around or dive in shooting, and so on. Games like that are replayable, but the replayability is just a by-product. The crucial point is that the player has real choice. His decisions matter. Multiple-branching structures are often a way to disguise that they don't.

The last gamebook I wrote was called Heart of Ice. Instead of multiple branches, I offered the player twelve skills and let them pick any four. Any mix would allow you to complete the adventure, but in very different ways. The story belonged to the player.

If a game is fun and provides genuine depth of choice, people will want to replay it. Forcing them to replay it in an obsessive attempt to cover all the hidden extras is something else again. The aim of design isn't to find ways to make people interact with your game, it's to find ways to make them want to interact.

■ **This design column regularly appears in game development trade journal Develop.**

Want to write a mod tutorial for PC GAMES ADDICT? Then contact:

dan@derwenthoward.com.au

Tyrannous Rex was a shiny, day-glo red, and don't let anyone tell you different.
SLAP!
DODGED!
T-REX - 41 HP - 11020 LBS
THE LEGENDARY KING OF THE TYRANT LIZARDS
PRESSURE PUNCH (F6)

Minuteman and Diablo regard their new sofa with concern.

Freedom Force

If the spandex fits, wear it

BITE! *Swift Punch!* Resisted! Everyone who played *Freedom Force* remembers The Bit With the Giant Ants.

ON THE DVD Play *Freedom Force* for yourself > Demos, and read the original review, rescanned > Resources

LONG PLAY

Is the original superhero RPG still as much fun?

Until a few months back, I thought *Freedom Force* was another in the sadly long line of quirky games that we loved dearly but which never got the following they deserved. But when I learned that, joyously, a sequel was in the works, it prompted me to seek it out again.

Time has been very kind to *Freedom Force* and it still looks delightful – as a loving tribute to '60s Silver Age comics, it could hardly date. Plus, my worryingly early senility means that I'd forgotten almost everything of the story, which meant I got to enjoy the massively entertaining yarn all over again, taking in the formation of the titular team, the origins of each hero and some meaty battles with mighty supervillains.

It's an action-packed hybrid of roleplay and real-time strategy, where you play superheroes in a world of wonderfully destructible scenery. Selecting a character lets you direct them around the modestly-sized levels and use their special powers – broadly split into melee and ranged attacks, shields and more unusual effects. No one hero is omnipotent, their weaknesses force you to think tactically and utilise the team's various powers in combination. The roleplaying bit revolves around new powers that can be bought with experience points gathered on each mission, enabling you to develop your favourite heroes and leave the weedier ones (take a bow, Mentor) back at base.

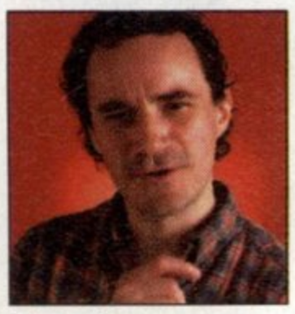
But what makes *FF* such a delight is the conviction with which it carries everything off. Quite simply, this is a great comicbook and you get to play it. The story and the style are superb – bright and bombastic, expertly aping the Stan Lee/Steve Ditko/Jack Kirby era at Marvel. It's a joy to play through the missions, you can't help but become attached to the characters, and every subtle detail brings a smile to your face as you realise there are people out there who love comics as much as you do.

It's a great comicbook, and you get to play it

Aside from the fact that it's over all too soon, there's really only one thing wrong with *FF* – its habitually ugly game camera. To play it well, you need to zoom right out, reducing a pretty game to bland top-down views, while zooming in close rarely does the wonderful character designs justice. And as with a number of older games, if you have Windows Service Pack 2 you'll have to uninstall it to play.

None of that matters, though. Many a game has tried and failed to woo the comicbook fraternity but only one has ever nailed costumed superheroics with such irresistible panache. This one may look a bit dated when you spot the box in the bargain bin, but when this is a niche RPG phenomena that was executed so well, it's easy to recommend.

Want to see a classic game revisited in PC GAMES ADDICT? Send your links to:
pcga@derwenthoward.com.au


Played by
Chris Buxton
Played For
Two months

PC GAMES README

DATA FLOW

First review N/A

Why now? There's a sequel due April.

Comicbooks get the game they deserve in this finely crafted tale of tactics and tights.

■ **Publisher** Electronic Arts ■ **Developer** Irrational ■ **Requires** 300MHz CPU, 96Mb RAM, 16Mb 3D card, no XP Service Pack 2 ■ **Multiplayer** Four players, online
■ **Link** www.freedomfans.com ■ **Community** www.alexff.com ■ **Influenced by** Marvelous comicbooks ■ **Spiritual successor** City of Heroes, Freedom Force vs The Third Reich ■ **Get it from** Game shops

PC CD ROM

Mac

ARE YOU MISSING OUT ON THIS SEASON'S TOP SCORER?

"Scarily Addictive. Feels even less like 'Fantasy Football'." - 90%
PC GAMES ADDICT

PC GAMES GOLD GAME ★★★★★

"Sports Interactive still has an unshakeable grip on the cup. Peerless." - 9/10
PC POWERPLAY

"Put simply, Football Manager is the best football management game Sports Interactive have produced to date." - 9/10
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Lamarr, the adorable pet headcrab in *HL2*. Barney would love to see him stuffed.

CULTURE

Headcrabs make another leap – to cuddly toy status

BED BUGS

Crabstitch

Making crabs fashionable

The hour is late, and you're heading to bed after an extended *Half-Life 2* session. But you need an icon to ward off the nightmares. Something soft, something plush, something you can snuggle up to in the night. You need... a cuddly headcrab.

The sewing pattern available at the URL below is one of the first outré offerings to be produced by the *Half-Life 2* community outside of simple code-tweaks. By transferring or tracing the pattern to a piece of fabric, cutting it out, stitching the bits together, and then stuffing them with fluffy wool, you too can create a lifesize version of the headhumpers, perfect for cuddling up to overnight. For extra bonus points, sit in a corner moaning, with it expertly draped across your face.

With the Snark pattern appearing only days later (Snarks were the tiny living spiders you could release as weapons in the original *Half-Life*, if you remember), it can't be too long before these needlecrafty people recreate the entire *Half-Life 2* menagerie in soft felt.

Obviously, we all want one. But we can't sew, we can't knit, and our girlfriends are all sexually emancipated women. So we need your help. We'd love for you to sew us all a headcrab for our desks. We'll reward the best with juicy games.

■ **http://auburn.edu/~fullemg/mod**

SCIENCE

FIGHTING FIT

Do you think you play games to relax? According to work carried about by researchers at the University of Hull, shoot-'em-up games don't help you relax at all. Dr Jeremy S Thornton and Dr Jon H Purdy have demonstrated that action games like *Unreal Tournament* actually raise players' heart-rates to levels equivalent to a good workout, "...suggesting heart-rates in an exercise region equivalent to running for the majority of the experiment." It's the first step in a long series of experiments to study why people play and enjoy games. "Is it because the players stop thinking about their problems," ask Jeremy and Jon, "or is it the excitement of the competition that fastens the player to the situation created by the game?"

■ **www.dcs.hull.ac.uk**

What's happening in your gaming world?
Tell us your tales of gaming wonder...
dan@derwenthoward.com.au

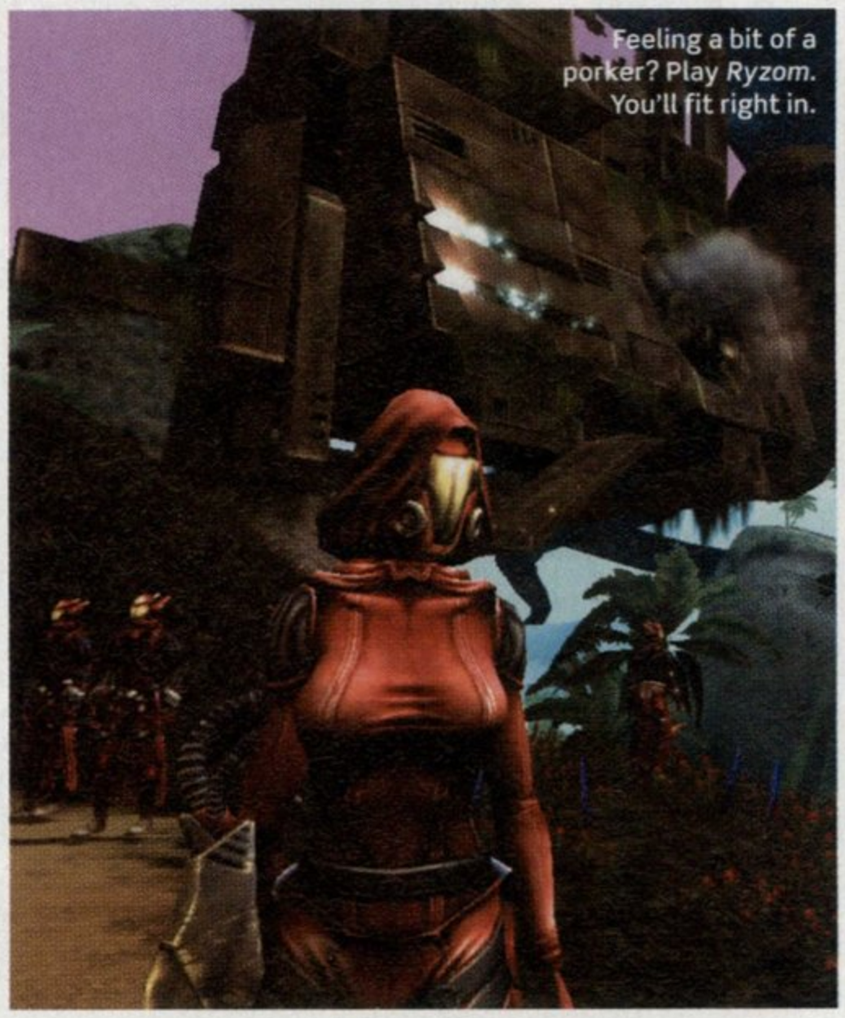
XP ABUSE

Yobo hunt

Naked pig slappers

Forgive the *Star Wars Galaxies* designers. They couldn't have predicted that gamers would go to such extraordinary lengths to level-up. That players would form troupes of 'tumblers' to boost each others' healing stats. It works like this. In an open area, a group of healers and medics will sit, cross-legged, while players continually forward roll around them. The forward roll uses Action Points, which are restored with a spell by the healers. The healers gain health XP – gaining levels on the route to Master status. The acrobats go away with a tip, a bag of credits and a few trinkets. It's a behaviour evolved from the game rules, absurd yet functional.

A similar situation is developing in the *Saga of Ryzom*. For healers to level-up their powers, an essential opening step in the world, they must repeatedly use them. Yet regular play just doesn't offer enough chances to whip out the healing spell. Instead zones inhabited by Yobos – furry, mostly docile pigs – are being camped-on by healers, who provoke them into attacking, whereupon a partner can heal the inevitable tiny wounds.



Feeling a bit of a porker? Play *Ryzom*. You'll fit right in.

Here comes the problem. Yobos are the smallest of the small, the weediest in the menagerie. Their bite is deflected by even the loosest armour. To be hurt, you've got to drop your leather pants and overcoat, and proffer a bare chest to the Yobos. Even basic weapons will slaughter them in a single hit, so any weapons are dropped, in favour of bare knuckles and open-hand slaps.

■ **www.starwarsgalaxies.com**
■ **www.ryzom.com**

XP DEBT

Charity case

Fair online trade

CULTURE
CASH FOR COWS

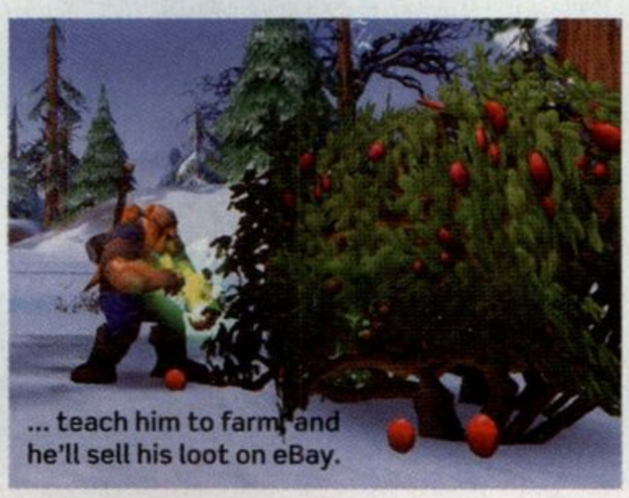
Worried that you're spending too much time online, and not enough doing something about the problems of the real world? Worry no more. Thanks to IGE, an online currency merchant, virtual cash can now be donated to charity as real cash, and used to rebuild broken communities in poverty-wracked regions across the globe.

The IGE will buy currency from players of *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *EVE Online*, *EverQuest* and other popular games, then make a corresponding donation to the Mercy Corps, a US-based charity. The exchange rate

varies hugely between games, 25 million ISK from *EVE Online* buys a $13 gift, while a mere 5,000L$ from *Second Life* will by a $22 contribution. IGE even allows you to decide where your money is put to use: choices range from Iraq and Afghanistan to Central Africa. If you're a rich man in the virtual realm, the Mercy Corps even offer 'Mercy Kits', stashes of supplies that can be sent abroad. A $200 donation will buy a 'Cow Kit', a dairy cow and calf for a family in the former Soviet Union, or $70 for a 'Sheep Kit'. Finally, we can exercise our social conscience without leaving our comfy game-chairs.

■ **www.ige.com**

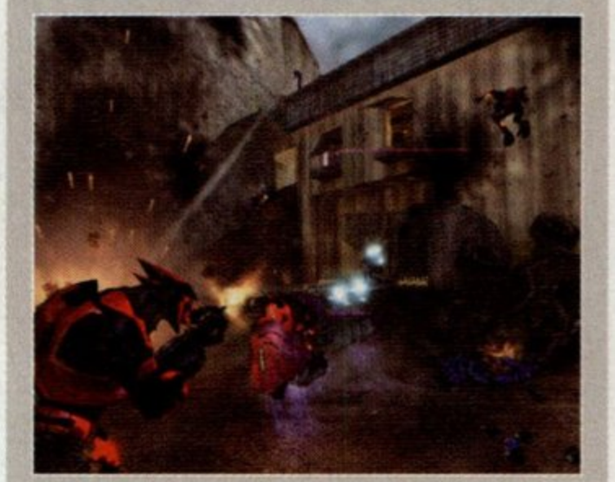
Buy a dwarf a pumpkin, and he'll eat for a day...



... teach him to farm, and he'll sell his loot on eBay.

NUMBERS GAME

STAT-ATTACK



Stat tracking, the ability for a game to log how well you play over extended periods of time, has yet to take off in PC gaming. Maybe it's time more developers took a look at the astonishing data-logs that are spewed out by *Halo 2*. Along with online rankings and logs of kills, deaths, accuracy and performance statistics, there's a superb kill-viewer that allows you to see exactly where, when and who you killed in a particular game. There's endless bragging potential in perusing your final scores, spotting conflict hotspots, and eyeing possible areas to sneak past the defences. It's a supremely useful tool for organised clans, enabling them to plan new strategies, and analyse their strengths and weaknesses.

Yet Bungie go even further. Embedded in their code is support for internet 'Rich Site Summary', or RSS, documents'. This means your data can be analysed and tracked in real-time by your own PC. Using a dedicated RSS reader, or even a spreadsheet like Excel (find an example spreadsheet on the disc), your stats can be analysed as you play. One more reason to drag your PC into the lounge.

■ **www.bungie.net**

WHY I LOVE... ›**Game** World of Warcraft ›**Gamer** Dan Toose ›**Love affair** Teaching pets new tricks

WORKING WITH ANIMALS

The virtual pet rescue

In the World of Warcraft, I am a Night Elf hunter, a warrior that specialises in combat out in the open. Being a ranged weapon specialist, I rely upon my faithful Nightsabre cat Bast to work as our front line and fall guy.

Although many other hunters I encountered on my travels went about taming different animals based on their stats, Bast was the first animal I tamed and I'd grown fond of him. He'd grown fond of me too, I was apparently his 'Best Friend'.

Over the course of our adventures, we tried different things, experimenting on how to control whether our foe was attacking Bast or our hunter. His 'Growl' skill would hold the attention of our enemies, giving me the space needed to unload heavy damage with my bow. This seemed to be working fine, but because Bast had such a good working relationship with me, I didn't realise we needed time apart.

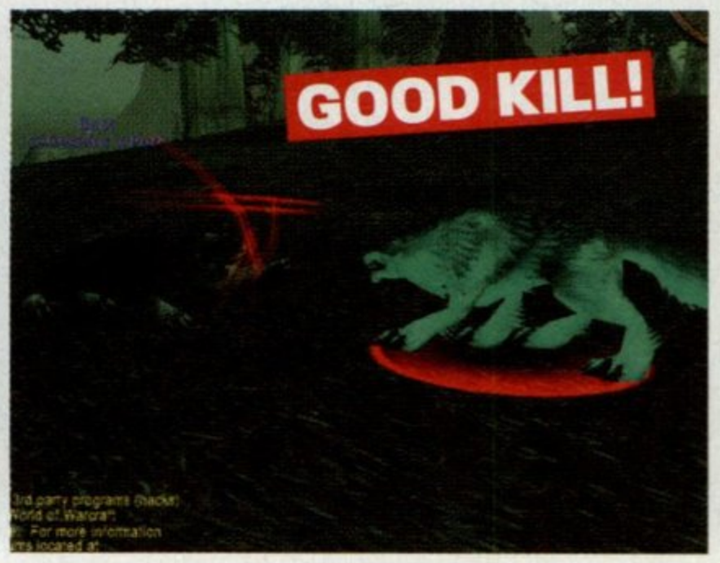
No, this isn't a sappy virtual pet story, the problem was that a hunter can learn new skills to teach their pets by taming new ones that possess these skills, and I hadn't been taming new pets - You can only have one with you. Like a stoic one-man family, I pop the jealous Bast into the pet stables and heads off into the wilds to 'play' with other animals.

The time apart may have been hard, but Bast feels like a new cat, and I'm now accustomed to watching him deal with our adversaries far more effectively.

More reasons to love the *World of Warcraft* next month...

1 STUDENT TEACHES MASTER

After stabling Bast, I begin my search for exceptional pets with new skills, finally finding success with a Scorpid in Desolace. He demonstrates the 'Claw' skill on a Baslisk for me to learn, before I then head off to acquire new pets and skills in far off lands. Eventually, I return to the stables for a re-union with my prized pet.



2 TEACHING DOGS NEW TRICKS

Teaching Bast some new tricks isn't a problem, he picks up the new attacks (and an escape route via 'Cower') immediately, and applies them in the next battle. Those poor hapless canines were expecting the natural order to see them on top of the food chain, but Bast's nasty new 'Claw' attack led to another outcome...

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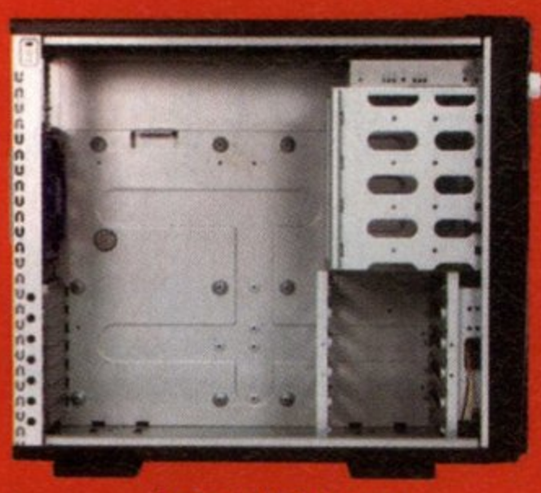

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PC GAMES ADDICT

HARDWARE

In which our panel of seasoned hardware gurus put the latest tech toys to the test

Season of change

The new face of PCGA hardware...

As you begin to digest the chunks of gaming goodness served up on the previous pages, the last thing you probably expected to see was this 'welcome mat' in front of your beloved tech supplement, but allow me to explain.

I'm Asher Moses, the new hardware editor here at PCGA. You've probably seen some of my work before, but PCGA is my home now.

I've been managing the hardware section since issue 29, but only now have we begun incorporating some of the changes we've been throwing around the office for quite some time now. Firstly, you'll notice the inclusion of this introduction page, which from now on will allow me to introduce the topics covered each month, or provide a soap box for my future ranting (*queue menacingly evil laugh*). Fortunately or unfortunately, this signals the end of 'Big Gear Hunt', which will be replaced by periodical buyer's guides that will be much more thoroughly backed up by extensive benchmarking. 'Moddin' Art' has also been removed, but in its place is an extra page of 'Money Pit', which can still of course include any must-have modding gear that catches our eye.

There's certainly much more to come, like proper group tests, full hardware features and topical pieces on things about hardware you probably didn't know, or had even contemplated.

But we'll take this one step at a time, and we'd love you to take those steps with us. If you've got any feedback, comments or suggestions, fire them into my inbox: asher@derwenthoward.com.au where I'll be anxiously awaiting your response!

ASHER MOSES
HARDWARE EDITOR

Hardware this issue...

EXPERT ADVICE ON...
PCI Express 89

THE MONEY PIT
NEW TECH - nVidia SLI
SLI with Asus A8N-SLI 89
MSI K8N Diamond Edition 89
SB Audigy 2 PCMCIA 90
GeCube X850XT 91
Asus 6800 Ultra 91
Xpert Vision 6200 TC 92
Shuttle SB86i 92
A4Tech battery free desktop 93
Abit Fatality AA8XE 93

PLAY FASTER
Softmod your video card 94
Change effects in HL2 95

The PC Games Addict Hardware Testing Rig

THE PCGA AWARDS

Any piece of kit that's awarded with our coveted **GOLD GEAR** award is of the best in its class and would make a valuable addition to your system. **SICK DEAL** awards go to gear that offers a good feature-set at an affordable price point. A 'sick' deal.

PC GAMES GOLD GEAR ★★★★★

PC GAMES SICK DEAL ★★★★★

Cutting-edge hardware deserves to be benchmarked on a review rig of similar merit, which is why all of the gear that passes through the PCGA labs is thoroughly stress tested on some of the best hardware money can buy.

Altech has generously supplied us with not one, but two review machines that in turn enable us to give you comprehensive coverage of both Intel and AMD platforms, free of unnecessary result-skewing bottlenecks.

CORSAIR

ABIT Advanced Durability

THE PC GAMES ADDICT REVIEW MACHINES:

INTEL REVIEW MACHINE
- Intel Pentium 4 3.2GHz
- Abit AA8XE
- Asus 256MB GeForce 6800 Ultra
- Corsair 1GB DDR2-533
- Seagate Barracuda SATA 80GB 7200RPM
- AOC 19" CRT Monitor
- Sony 12x/8x/32x CD-RW
- Lian-Li PC65 Chassis

AMD REVIEW MACHINE
- AMD Athlon 64 3500+
- Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe
- Asus 256MB GeForce 6800 Ultra
- Corsair 1GB PC3200 DDR (2x 512MB sticks)
- Seagate Barracuda SATA 80GB 7200RPM
- AOC 19" CRT Monitor
- Sony 12x/8x/32x CD-RW
- Lian-Li PC65 Chassis

EXPERT ADVICE ON PCI EXPRESS

Your guide to the latest motherboard technology

BY NEIL MOHR

Change is in the air, a revolution is rumbling through the PC world. Two core components are being ripped from the heart of contemporary PC design and replaced by a single young upstart. Those parts are the current graphic card interface of choice, AGP, and the even more elderly PCI slot. Both types of slots have been fighting for survival for a while, it was just a matter of time before Intel, the Caesar of the digital world, gave them both the thumbs down, letting the new champion stride forth into the PC arena. (*Enough with the extended metaphors* – Prod Ed.)

PCI Express, or PCIe for short, is that all-new, shiny technology. At this point all the usual questions apply: What is it? Why's it better? What can it do for us? And not surprisingly the answers are that it's bigger, better, faster and cheaper. Who'd have guessed?

These are some bold claims, but it's all achieved using modern serial bus technologies, a bus being the connection between various PC components that lets them communicate with each other. If you're thinking "hang on, my old serial port is as slow as a tortoise with four broken legs" then yes, good point. The difference is, that's an old school serial port, harking back to the days of Miami Vice and big hair, compared to modern serial technology – which is a whole different kettle of fish. Or maybe cereal.

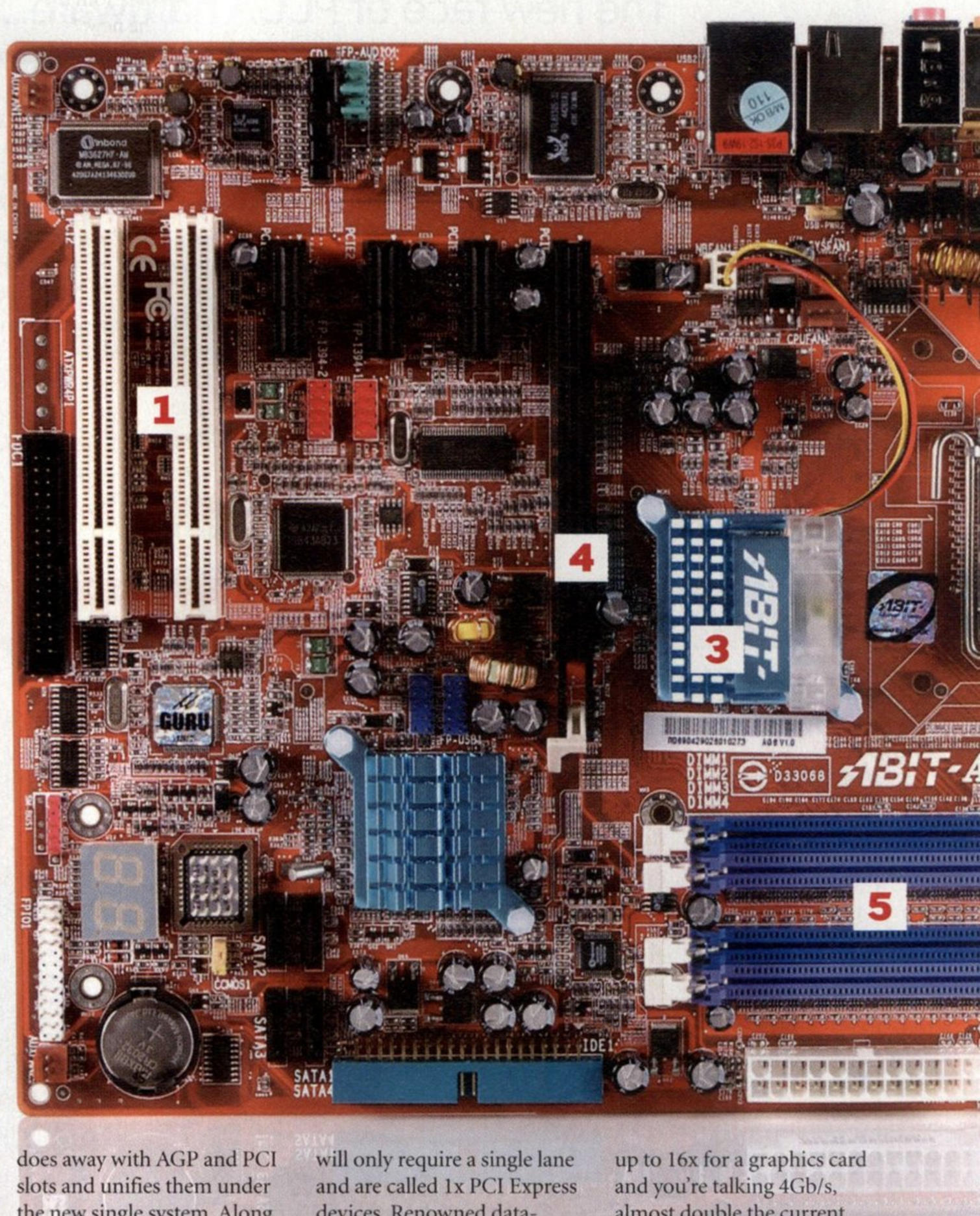
The beauty of serial transfers is that they massively simplify the process of sending data, meaning that this can be done at much faster speeds. The problem with ordinary, parallel buses is that power levels rise as speed increases. The amount of cross channel noise grows too, and this makes it increasingly difficult to reliably deliver data over the bus. Which is why hard drives are switching from the old parallel ATA interface to the new Serial ATA interface, while other buses such as USB and Firewire have always been serial and long ago spanked the old parallel port into submission.

> At this point, all the usual questions apply

It's now time for our PC's internal peripherals to go serial with PCI Express. This does away with AGP and PCI slots and unifies them under the new single system. Along with increased speed, serial buses have the other advantage of requiring fewer wires. Cutting the cord makes motherboards simpler to design and cheaper to build, delivering more bandwidth per pin than PCI or AGP ever could. Another feature of PCI Express is that it's scalable. If you have a device that requires more data bandwidth then you just have to provide another serial connection, using a 'lane'. Most devices will only require a single lane and are called 1x PCI Express devices. Renowned data-hungry hogs like graphics cards will start off as 16x devices, and there will be room to expand into 32x devices if need be.

To put this into context, AGP 8x can deliver 2.1Gb/s of data, while the old PCI bus has a total bandwidth of 132Mb/s, which has to be shared between all the PCI devices. A 1x lane PCIe device, on the other hand, has exclusive access to 250Mb/s of bandwidth. Multiply this up to 16x for a graphics card and you're talking 4Gb/s, almost double the current AGP 8x standard.

The new PCIe system is also smart. It will be able to offer slots 1x, 4x, 8x, 16x and eventually 32x in size, which increase in physical dimensions as well as speed. But a 1x device plugged into a 4x or larger slot will still work happily away, as the hardware at both ends is adaptable enough to cope. This built-in flexibility also extends to the newly emerging SLI motherboards,



SYSTEMS README

›**WHY AM I HERE?** Your current PC is a steam-powered dinosaur and has parts that'd work well in a '60s sci-fi show.

›**RISK FACTOR?** Badly installing your motherboard will hurt like:

›**IS IT EASY?** Fitting a new mobo is as easy as

›**SELL IT TO ME...** A world of cutting-edge technology will be yours to command in the form of a new, all-powerful PC.

PCGAMES ADDICT DICTIONARY THE OED OF GAMING

AGP› Accelerated Graphics Port, introduced to alleviate the burden of graphics traffic on the PCI bus.
Bandwidth› The amount of data a bus can shift, usually per second. The more the better.
Bus› A fixed line of communication between two or more devices.
DDR› Double Data Rate memory, refers to the current memory standard.
Dual Channel› Refers to accessing memory when using a pair, or two pairs, of memory sticks, thereby increasing speed.
PCI-X› A faster version of the old PCI peripheral connecting standard. PCI-X uses 64bits, runs at twice the speed, but is not PCI-Express.
SLI› Scalable Link Interface, nVidia's system for running two graphic cards in parallel.

1 PCI
Scheduled to become extinct over the next few years, the old PCI slot has served us well, securing our sound cards and all manner of other peripherals.

2 PROCESSOR SOCKET
You must choose which processor technology your motherboard will be based on. It's a simple decision between AMD's Athlon 64 or Intel's new socket 775 Pentium 4

3 CHIPSET
To initially boot your PC and route all the data around it, a motherboard needs a core chipset. This stands between the processor and the rest of your motherboard and its various devices, directing data wherever it needs to go.

4 PCI EXPRESS
The new slots in question. The huge one is the 16x lane slot designed for your graphics card, while the tiny ones are single (1x) lanes for standard peripherals.

5 DIMM SLOTS
Most motherboards are still running DDR1-standard RAM, usually in dual-channel memory configuration. Watch out for new socket 775 boards that are moving to the new DDR2 memory standard, for which you'll have to buy some new RAM.

which are nVidia's magic trick for running two graphics cards alongside each other. Currently no motherboard chipset supports enough PCIe lanes to offer full dual 16x support. The compromise made by nVidia's nForce 4 SLI is runnng both graphics cards with 8x lanes. Thankfully this is something you will never have to worry about as it's all taken care of automatically. Well, that's the theory...

The PC world never totally jumps ship when it comes to new technology, so expect a phased transition from the old regime to the new. Some boards will offer AGP and PCI Express slots on the same board. We'd also expect to still see old PCI slots lingering on motherboards for years to come. So don't worry about not being able to use your expensive Audigy card with your new motherboard. And only expect to see 1x lane and 16x lane expansion slots initially, as the only devices that currently need higher levels of data throughput are graphics cards, Gigabit LAN cards and HDTV tuner cards.

By the time you read this, all the usual suspects will be flogging PCI Express motherboards. These will be based on a number of chipsets. Prefer Intel processors? You'll only find support from Intel in the form of its 915 low-end and 925 high-end chipsets for its new socket 775 processors. While these are still badged as Pentium 4, expect to have to buy a new processor if you go down this route. For AMD lovers, Athlon 64 is the only option, in the form of either nVidia's nForce 4 chipset or the VIA K8T890 range. Whichever option you go for, your new PCI Express system will be a cutting-edge, futurist's dream. Unless of course someone comes up with a new standard before this one takes off...

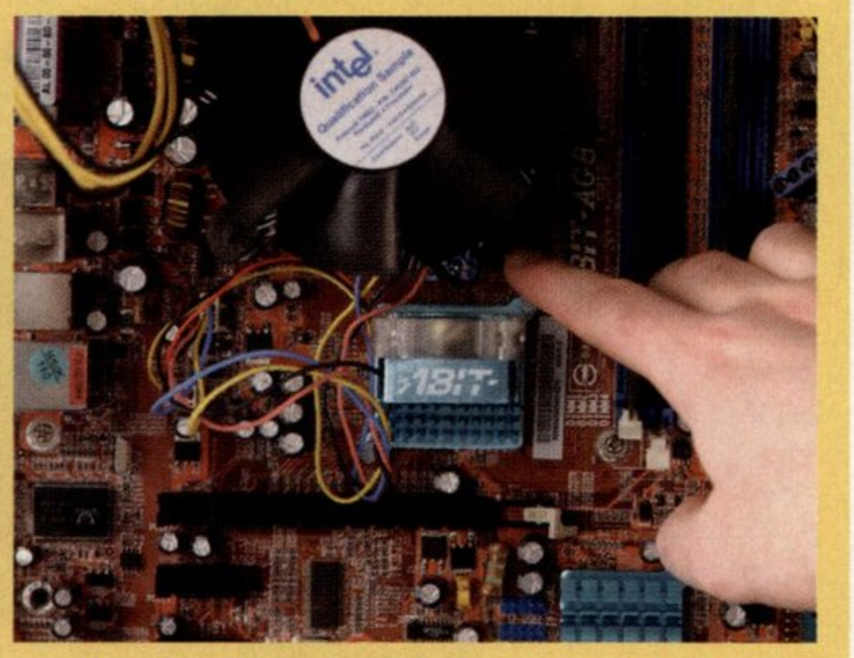
Want a tech topic covered?
Then mail your request to:
asher@derwenthoward.com.au

WHAT NEXT...?

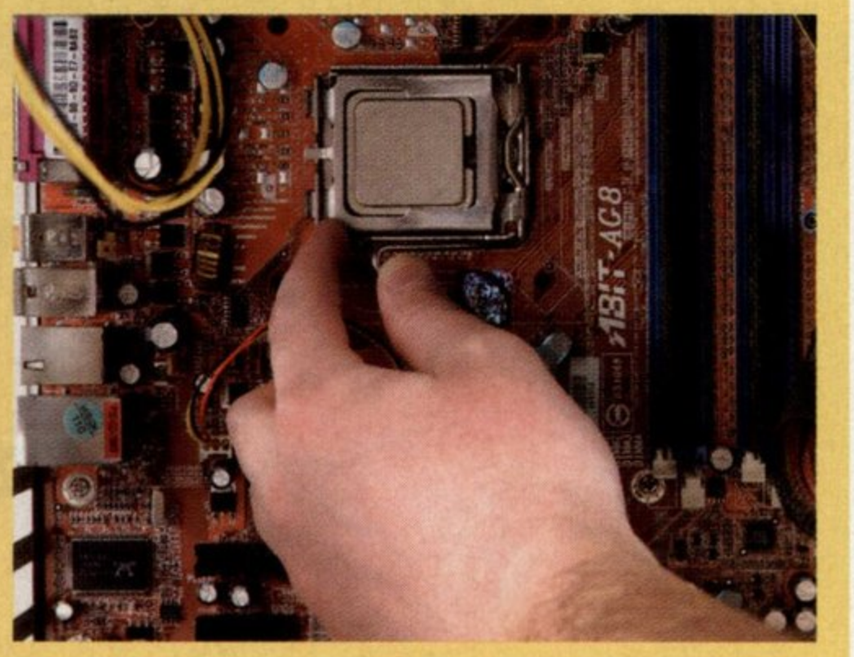
- **Turn the page for our round-up of the latest PCI Express motherboards.**
- A fresh install of Windows XP will be necessary, so back-up your data first.
- **The socket 775 standard will be around for a while, so future CPU upgrades should still be possible without scrapping your existing PCI motherboard.**
- Already own an ATi x800 or nVidia 6800 graphics card? You'll gain no benefit from PCI Express just yet, other than being able to boast to your mates.
- **And don't upgrade just to get PCI Express, it's not *that* life-changing. Upgrade because it's time to get a new system anyway.**

MASTERCLASS

How to... Install your motherboard



1 With all your old kit torn out of your PC case and placed securely in the nearest dustbin, you can start by lowering your new beautiful motherboard into place. You may need to reposition the spacers within your case that the motherboard rests on, to match the layout of your new board, but there are only a few, standard configurations. Make sure the motherboard is secure and you can install the processor next.



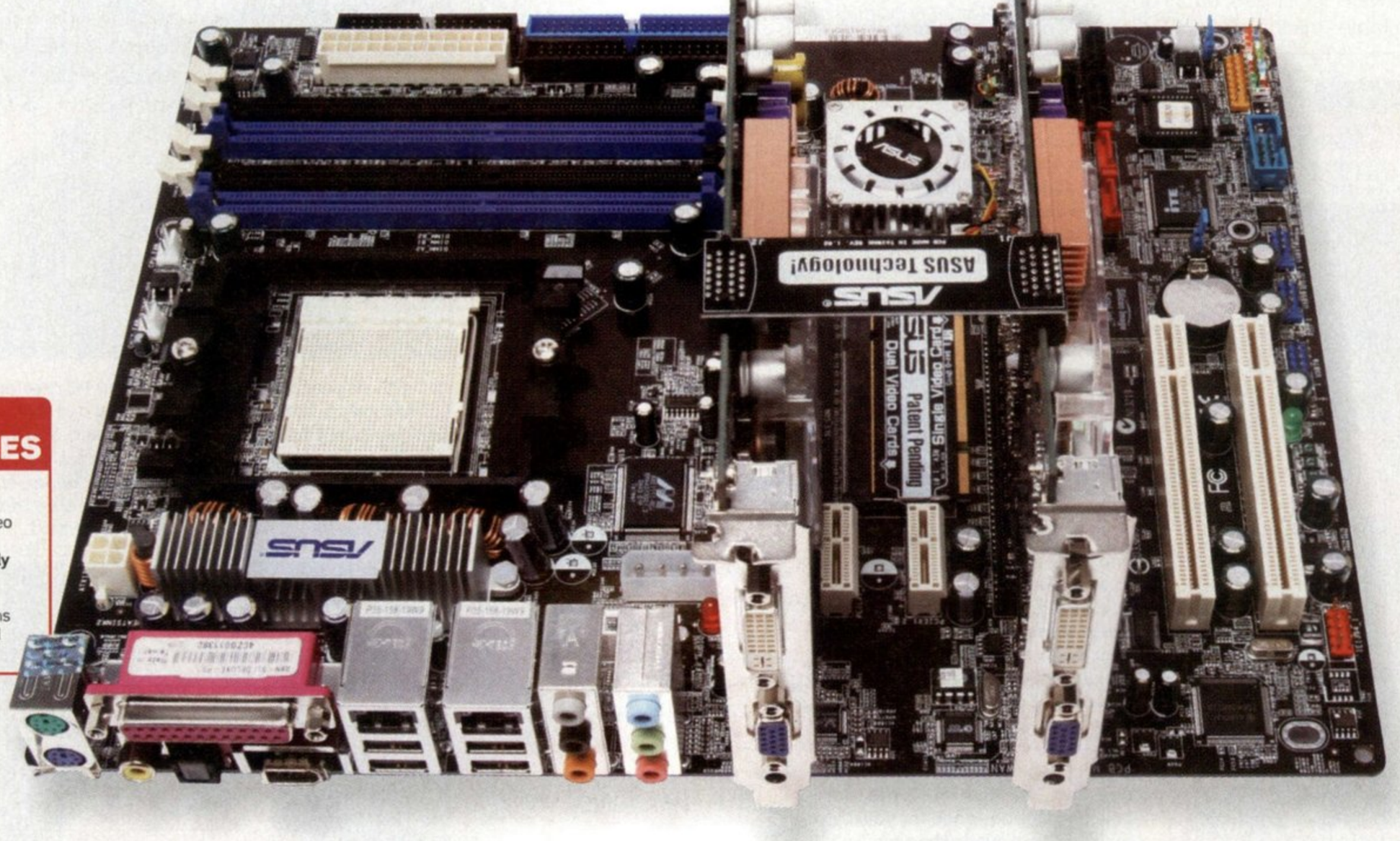
2 The new socket 775 Pentium 4 system has the pins on the motherboard rather than the processor. Because of this, you'll find a black plastic protective cover on the socket. Remove this. Unhook the side latch, flip up the metal cover and carefully place the processor dimple-side down. Make sure the processor is orientated correctly by matching the notches in the side of the processor.

3 A new-style cooler is used for the new socket, this is secured at its four corners with pushdown clips, which, once in place, you simply twist to secure. With this done just pop in the memory and graphics card for your new board, and attach all the power connectors. There will also be some fiddly wires to attach the various LEDs and switches on your case to the board. You're now ready to power-up and test your new PC.

ON THE SLI

How does a 70% speed-boost sound?

BY ASHER MOSES - HARDWARE EDITOR



KEY FEATURES

- **Uses socket 939 processors**
- Two identical video cards required
- **New power supply may be required**
- 30%-70% performance gains
- **Currently limited game support**

Laying down the gauntlet

NVIDIA NFORCE 4 WITH SLI

Nvidia www.nvidia.com

The word on everyone's lips at the moment is Nvidia's latest graphical innovation, SLI, enabling the concurrent use of two graphics cards in order to theoretically achieve double the rendering power.

The technology was originally developed by 3dfx as Scan Line Interleaving on its Voodoo 2 line of cards, but unfortunately fell by the way-side as single-slotted AGP motherboards phased out the use of PCI for graphical purposes.

With the introduction of PCI-Express and the GeForce 6 series, Nvidia feels the environment is right to give SLI another try, and hence the nForce 4 was born. While this chipset boasts a number of interesting features, the most poignant of these (to gamers at least) is SLI and thus, this will be our main point of concentration for this article.

HOW IT WORKS

The crux of SLI is the simple principle of symmetrical load distribution, whereby the CPU forwards all vertex data onto the primary GPU down the PCI-Express bus, which the primary GPU then forwards on to the secondary GPU through Nvidia's video bridge. This is far more logical than GPU-to-GPU communication through the PCI-Express bus, as it eliminates many latency issues that would otherwise result.

Symmetry between each GPU is maintained by the rendering method chosen, which in this case is either AFR (Alternative Frame Rendering) or SFR (Split Frame Rendering). The former works much like the aforementioned 3dfx version of SLI, whereby each GPU renders every other frame, while SFR splits each individual frame between the two GPUs. In order to select between the two, Nvidia's engineers have profiled an initial set of 15 games and determined which rendering method offers the best performance. However, if a profile for a certain game doesn't exist, SLI is simply disabled and thus, a dual card setup is completely superfluous in these situations (see "SLI - The catch…").

Once rendering has been completed, the secondary GPU sends its frame buffer digitally to the primary GPU, which then outputs the image to the display.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

In order to build an SLI-based system, you'll firstly need two identical graphics cards (and we mean completely identical models, not just chipsets) from the Nvidia GeForce 6 series (ATI will be introducing its own SLI technology later this year). An SLI video bridge connector (supplied with the motherboard) is also needed, but the most important consideration is power.

Not only will you need a power supply capable of powering such a beastly system (at least 350W), but if you're planning on running Nvidia GeForce 6800 cards, additional 1x6-pin or 2x4-pin power adapters will also be required. Before purchasing anything, ensure that you have adequate connectors to power both cards as well as other components such as hard drives and optical drives. More devices mean more power.

REVIEW CRITERIA

WE'RE LOOKING FOR...

- **Performance** The primary reason anyone upgrades their PC is to increase its performance potential which for gamers means higher FPS and image quality levels. Will this occur here?
- **Backward compatibility** There's nothing worse than attempting to upgrade to new technology only to realise that all your old parts won't work. Good boards incorporate functionality for the old and the new.
- **Support** There's no point of having new technology if the benefits can only be seen in technical demos, rather than actual games. Thus, the technology must be supported by a large variety of games, if not now then there must be a guarantee of ongoing support in the future.
- **Value** SLI requires the purchase of two graphics cards as well as a new motherboard, so the performance increases must be large enough to justify the huge cost.

SLI - The catch...

One factor that's likely to hold up the initial adoption of SLI is the fact that there are only 21 applications (and around 16 actual games) that support the technology to the fullest at this point in time. Put simply, unless Nvidia has profiled the game in its drivers, only one GPU will be enabled, making a dual-setup completely superfluous. Below is a list of games currently supported by Nvidia:

1. Aquamark 3
2. Battlefield 1942: Desert Combat
3. Battlefield Vietnam
4. City of Heroes
5. Code Creatures Pro
6. Colin McRae Rally 4 Demo
7. Command and Conquer Generals
8. Doom 3
9. Far Cry
10. Ground Control 2
11. Half-Life 2
12. Halo
13. Painkiller
14. The Sims 2
15. Star Wars: Knights of the old Republic
16. Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness
17. Tron 2.0
18. Unreal 3 Engine
19. Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War
20. 3DMark 2003 Gold
21. 3DMark 2005 Gold

We put this to the test using unlisted games such as NFSU 2 and Everquest 2, all of which showed no benefit whatsoever when upgrading to an SLI configuration. It's baffling that Nvidia has opted to code profiles for a number of synthetic benchmarking applications (e.g. 3DMark) as well as a demo rather than using this time to program support for a wider array of games.

While Nvidia assures us that more games will be added to the list as time goes by (and that users will be able to update their game profiles online), if you're thinking about upgrading to an SLI setup but rarely play the games listed above then you should seriously think again. At least for the time being anyway.

IS IT WORTH IT?

We put SLI to the test using two Asus 6600GT cards (let's face it, who can really afford to purchase dual 6800 Ultra's), an Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard and 1GB of DDR400 memory on an Athlon 64 4000+ based system.

In each test performed, a similar trend was revealed – SLI gives the best performance increases when run at resolutions above 1024x768, particularly if anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing are enabled. For example in Half-Life 2, at 1024x768 our dual 6600GT cards performed almost identical to a single 6600GT, however, when we bumped the resolution up to 1280x1024 and 1600x1200 the performance increases were 18% and 40% respectively. What's more, with 4x AA and 8x AF enabled, we saw gains of 19%, 40% and 42% at 1024x768, 1280x1024 and 1600x1200 respectively. Overall, in all of the games we used for benchmarking, at higher resolutions performance gains were anywhere between 30%-70%.

By far the most enticing aspect of SLI is its upgrade-friendly nature. If you're unable to shell out enough cash for two cards immediately, on top of a new motherboard, simply purchase one and when they become cheaper, grab a second card for a quick and dirty performance increase.

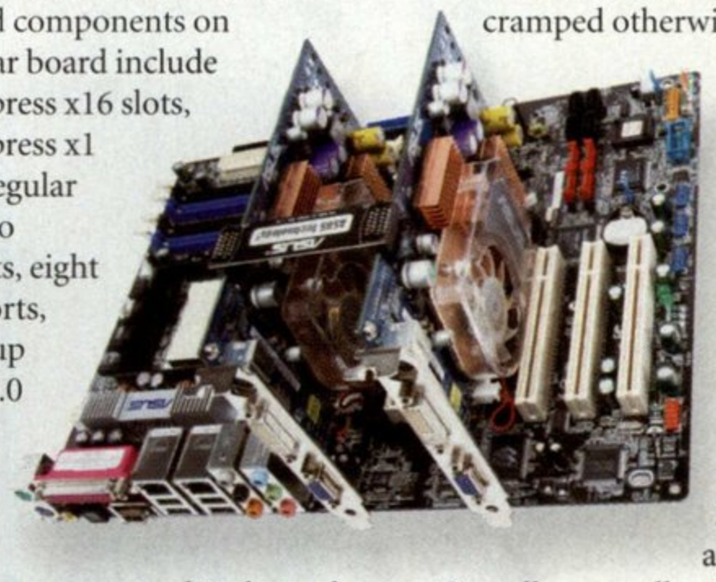
With SLI-enabled boards costing up to $300 each and dual 6600GT's setting you back at least $350 per card (more for a 6800 Ultra/GT), upgrading to SLI at this point in time isn't exactly the most wallet-friendly decision – particularly considering that you'll likely need to purchase a new PSU as well. However, if you're looking to build the most powerful gaming beast available and money isn't an issue, it's clear that an SLI setup currently reigns supreme… Just like it once did long ago.

Port proliferation
ASUS A8N-SLI DELUXE
$299

Synnex www.synnex.com.au 1300 880 038

If you've already made the decision to upgrade to an SLI configuration, Asus' A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard is a more than worthy basis for your system.

Integrated components on this particular board include two PCI-Express x16 slots, two PCI-Express x1 slots, three regular PCI slots, two ATA133 ports, eight SATA 300 ports, support for up to ten USB 2.0 ports, dual firewire (IEEE1394) ports, two Gigabit Ethernet ports and 8-channel Realtek integrated audio. A hearty feature-set to say the least, but WiFi support and a better integrated audio solution would've been better.



The inclusion of Asus' EZ Selector makes selecting a dual or single graphics card configuration a breeze, while the board's layout is almost impossible to fault. The only installation issue we foresee is that you'll need to make sure that you put your memory in before the video card as the board becomes quite cramped otherwise.

Rounding out the package is a free copy of WinDVD Suite, which includes the WinDVD 5, WinDVD Creator, DVD Copy and DiscMaster applications.

Overall, an excellent board that lacks the polish required to surpass MSI's offering.

PC GAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 85%
VALUE 80%
>Good, but it faces stronger competition.
81%

A diamond in the rough
MSI K8N DIAMOND $429

MSI www.msicomputer.com.au (02) 9748 0070

Although its port configuration isn't as extensive (including four less SATA ports and no PCI-Express x1 slot, but an extra firewire port), the K8N-Diamond's most impressive feature is by far its onboard Creative Soundblaster Live controller. The quality of this chip demolishes any other integrated audio solution we've seen (bar Nvidia's Soundstorm which isn't included on the nForce 4) and also supports EAX Advanced technology – great for gamers. It also sports both Bluetooth and Wi-Fi through a bundled PCI card, both of which the A8N-Deluxe lacks.

The K8N-Diamond's layout is on par with Asus' offering, but there's no free bundled software - a slight disappointment that's far outweighed by the features mentioned above.

MSI has clearly pulled out all the stops here, producing a board with the most impressive array of features we've seen to date - it's a great ad for SLI.

PC GAMES GOLD GEAR ★★★★★

PC GAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 85%
VALUE 93%
>Almost perfect. The pick of the crop.
90%

Music to my ears

CREATIVE AUDIGY 2 ZS NOTEBOOK

$350

Creative au.creative.com (02) 9021 9898

PC GAMES GOLD GEAR ★★★★★

KEY FEATURES

- **E-Mu 10K2 audio processor**
- PCMCIA-based
- **24-bit/192kHz stereo playback**
- 24-bit/96kHz multi-channel playback
- **7.1 speaker systems supported**

As graphic and sound solutions for notebooks become strikingly indiscernible from their desktop counterparts in terms of price, performance and quality, mobile gaming machines are now more viable than ever and particularly useful for the LAN gamer.

In the sound department, Creative has dominated desktop sales for years now, so we were naturally drooling with excitement when we strapped their latest notebook offering, the Audigy 2 ZS, to our test bed this issue.

The ZS Notebook is based on the same E-Mu 10K2 audio processor that powers its desktop sibling, and supports the full array of major audio standards including Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES decoding, DVD-Audio, THX 7.1 surround sound, EAX 4.0 and ASIO 2.0. In layman's terms, all of the funky sound effects you're used to hearing from the games, DVDs and even audio CDs on your desktop PC are supported here and then some.

For the technically inclined, in addition to 24-bit recording the device supports 24-bit/192kHz playback in stereo mode and 24-bit/96kHz playback in multi-channel mode. However, unlike its desktop cousin it boasts a lower signal to noise ratio of 104dB (as opposed to 108dB), which will result in a slight noise increase on the audio signal but nothing that will be noticed by anyone but the most pedantic audio connoisseur.

As far as I/O is concerned, the card features a combined SPDIF/headphone jack and Line-in/mic input, as well as an optional adapter enabling users to hook up speaker systems ranging from 2.1 to 7.1 without issue. It lacks RCA, SPDIF and MIDI support, but this was unavoidable due to the card's extremely compact design and is unlikely to be missed by your average gamer.

To allow you to make the most out of your new investment from the word go Creative has also bundled its own software suite with the device. They include among others a media player, music organiser, media converter, DVD-audio player and an array of consoles and control panels for the audiophile.

Installation of the Audigy 2 ZS is as easy as plugging it into a spare PCMCIA port and inserting the driver CD. However, one thing to take note of is Creative's signature habit of loading your system with applications, most of which you'll never use. Suffice it to say, a custom installation is highly recommended.

One issue users may encounter with the card is the fact that the notebook's inbuilt speakers will only work when the device is removed from the system, which may become tedious if you plan on sharing music or video with friends while on the go.

Considering the lack of upgrade options currently available to notebook users short of a complete overhaul, if you're only planning on purchasing one toy for your machine all year there's nothing we'd recommend more than the Creative Audigy 2 ZS Notebook. Compared to the onboard solution we were using previously, the improvements offered here are enormous and capable of enriching an audiophile or gamer's experience no end. With sound quality that's virtually identical to its desktop counterpart, there's no reason why us notebook users should have to go without any longer.

PC GAMES ADDICT

PERFORMANCE 91%
VALUE 92%

› The only real choice for top mobile audio.

95%

Speed Daemon
GECUBE RADEON X850XT
$899

Kingmax www.kingmax.com.au (02) 9648 4658

ATI's back with a new high-end chipset poised to compete directly with Nvidia's 6800 Ultra, dubbed the X850XT. It's only fitting then that we've managed to squeeze reviews of both cards onto the same page, for your edification.

The X850XT is based on ATI's new R480 chipset and sports a 520MHz core clock, 256MB of onboard memory running at 1120MHz and a whopping 16 pixel pipelines. This makes it architecturally very similar to its predecessor, the X800 series, with a few exceptions outside of the obvious clock speed increase. Firstly, power management has been altered, as the X850XT includes the ability to disable parts of the chip when they're not being used - resulting in far less power consumption and thus, lower heat output. The benefit of this for the consumer is that the GPU fan spins much slower, and therefore noise output is slightly lower than that produced by the 6800 Ultra. Admittedly, GeCube's inclusion of a heatpipe-based cooler is also a contributing factor towards this reduced heat output.

Another thoughtful inclusion by GeCube is a set of dual DVI ports for those that wish to run two LCD monitors at a time. Unfortunately there's only one DVI-to-VGA adapter, so dual VGA users are out of luck here.

Finally, VIVO is also supported, which is where the GeCube card boasts a significant advantage over Asus' offering.

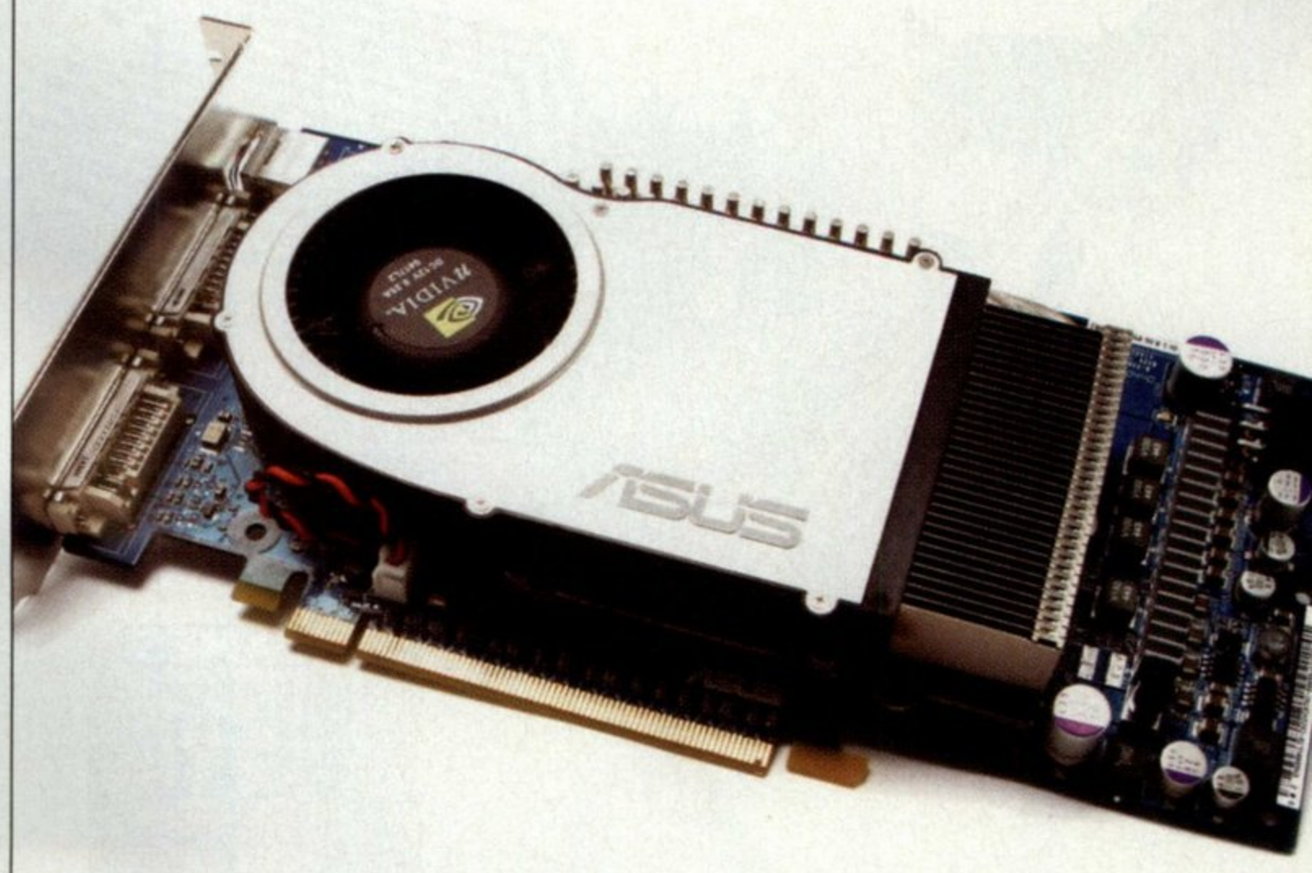
Currently the X850 is only available as a PCI-Express card, but Nvidia has hinted at AGP versions becoming available shortly.

In all tests performed the X850XT just managed to beat out the 6800 Ultra, by anywhere between 5-15%, with the 15% difference only being seen under higher resolutions.

Although this performance difference seems significant on paper, it's unnoticeable in a real-world gaming environment and thus, price and software bundle play a far larger role. Although the bundle accompanying the GeCube card is meagre when compared to Asus' offering (including just PowerDVD 5 and PowerDirector 2.5 ME), it's also $200 cheaper than the Asus card which will make it far more desirable for most users. This coupled with the slight performance advantage and VIVO support makes it, in our opinion, clearly the better option of the two.

PC GAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 92%
VALUE 90%
91%
›Best all round buy for high end gamers.

PC GAMES GOLD GEAR ★★★★★



Value-adding at its best
ASUS EXTREME N6800 ULTRA
$1,099

Synnex www.synnex.com.au 1300 880 038

By now most readers should already be familiar with the 6800 Ultra's technical specifications, so let's get straight on with the review.

Asus has won many a comparison here at PCGA for the primary reason that it continually includes a number of augmented benefits outside of the core product, which usually justify the slightly higher price that Asus demands over its competitors. In the above review we've already established that the GeCube X850XT performs slightly better than the 6800 Ultra, but we've also recognised that this isn't going to make a tangible difference to your gaming experience. What will make a difference is the bundle each manufacturer provides, and here Asus holds the trump card.

As far as software goes, Asus includes Doom 3, Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising, Asus DVD, PowerDirector 3DE and Asus MediaShow SE 2.0. Yes, you heard right – Doom 3! For some, this free software may even justify the extra $200 one would be paying for the Asus card, and it's particularly impressive to see a game as recent as Doom 3 already being included in 3rd-party bundles.

What's more, Asus also provides a free webcam with the package, which although isn't going to compete with the likes of Logitech any time soon, is perfect for video conferencing – a task that's becoming increasingly popular these days.

In addition, like the X850XT the N6800 Ultra boasts dual DVI ports, but while GeCube only bundles one DVI-to-VGA connector, Asus includes two in order to cater for those running dual VGA screens.

Unfortunately, unlike GeCube's offering, VIVO isn't supported, which is a huge disappointment and detracts from the card's score, but the inclusion of TV-out helps to negate this issue somewhat.

When it comes down to it, most serious gamers are likely to already own most of the software bundled with the Asus card (if they even need it in the first place), and thus price will weigh in much heavier in their decision-making. In light of this, although it's still an excellent card, the high price tag on the Asus N6800 Ultra will undoubtedly deter many potential buyers, especially considering the calibre of the competition such as the GeCube X850XT on this page.

PC GAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 88%
VALUE 75%
82%
›If only it was $200 cheaper...

It's not just regular cache...

XPERTVISION 6200 TURBOCACHE

$121

Altech www.altech.com.au (02) 9735 5655

For the gamer on a budget, there hasn't been much on offer in recent years that won't become obsolete during the bus ride home from Harvey Norman, much less support all of the graphical innovations in the latest games. This is because most cards targeted at this sector are simply stripped down versions of their high-end counterparts. With the release of Nvidia's latest innovation - the 6200 with TurboCache - this is all set to change as the graphics giant has found a way to include high-end technologies such as Shader Model 3.0, CineFX 3.0, UltraShadow II, Intellisample 3.0, nView and PureVideo whilst still reducing the cost of producing the card through minimal onboard memory.

The secret to this lies in TurboCache, which when coupled with a PCI-Express x16 link allows the GPU to write seamlessly to system memory, with a latency that's almost identical to that of writing to onboard memory. Thus, although the XpertVision offering only includes 64MB of onboard memory (reducing overall costs), its memory bandwidth equals that of a 256MB card provided you have at least 512MB of system memory installed.

This places the 6200 with TurboCache in the same price segment as ATI's X300 chipset, yet at the same time allows it to significantly outperform the X300 in newer DirectX 9.0 games such as Half-Life 2 and Doom 3 due to its cutting edge Shader 3.0 support. That said, it must be made clear that this card is suited only to the casual gamer, as frame rates in HL2 nonetheless hover around the 50fps mark (still very playable) and any resolution above 1024x768 becomes a slideshow.

XpertVision's package doesn't come with much in the way of a software bundle, but it does include both TV-out and DVI support, both of which are handy even if you don't plan on playing many games at all.

The bottom line is, if you're on a tight budget and are thinking about sticking with onboard graphics for the time being, shell out the few extra dollars for a 6200 with TurboCache instead and you'll be able to have adequate gaming sessions without forgoing a month's worth of food. Who says you can't have your cake and eat it too?

PCGAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 70%
VALUE 85%
›A top alternative to onboard video
83%

Proving that size doesn't matter

SHUTTLE XPC SB86I

$494

Altech www.altech.com.au (02) 9735 5655

If there's one manufacturer that's pioneered the progression of small form-factor PCs, it's undoubtedly Shuttle. Ever since its first barebones, Shuttle has continually improved on its designs with sleeker aesthetics, copious new features and a more compact footprint.

Intel's new BTX (Balanced Technology Extended) technology has opened up myriad possibilities for Shuttle, embodied in its latest creation, the SB86i.

Based on the Intel 915G chipset, the SB86i supports LGA775 Pentium 4 processors and boasts a DirectX 9-supporting integrated graphics chipset. However, realising that the performance from this graphics chipset is far from acceptable to most gamers there's also a PCI-E x16 slot to house an add-in card. The machine unfortunately lacks a PCI-E x1 slot (a regular PCI slot is included instead), but considering the lack of PCI-E x1 peripherals this isn't a significant omission.

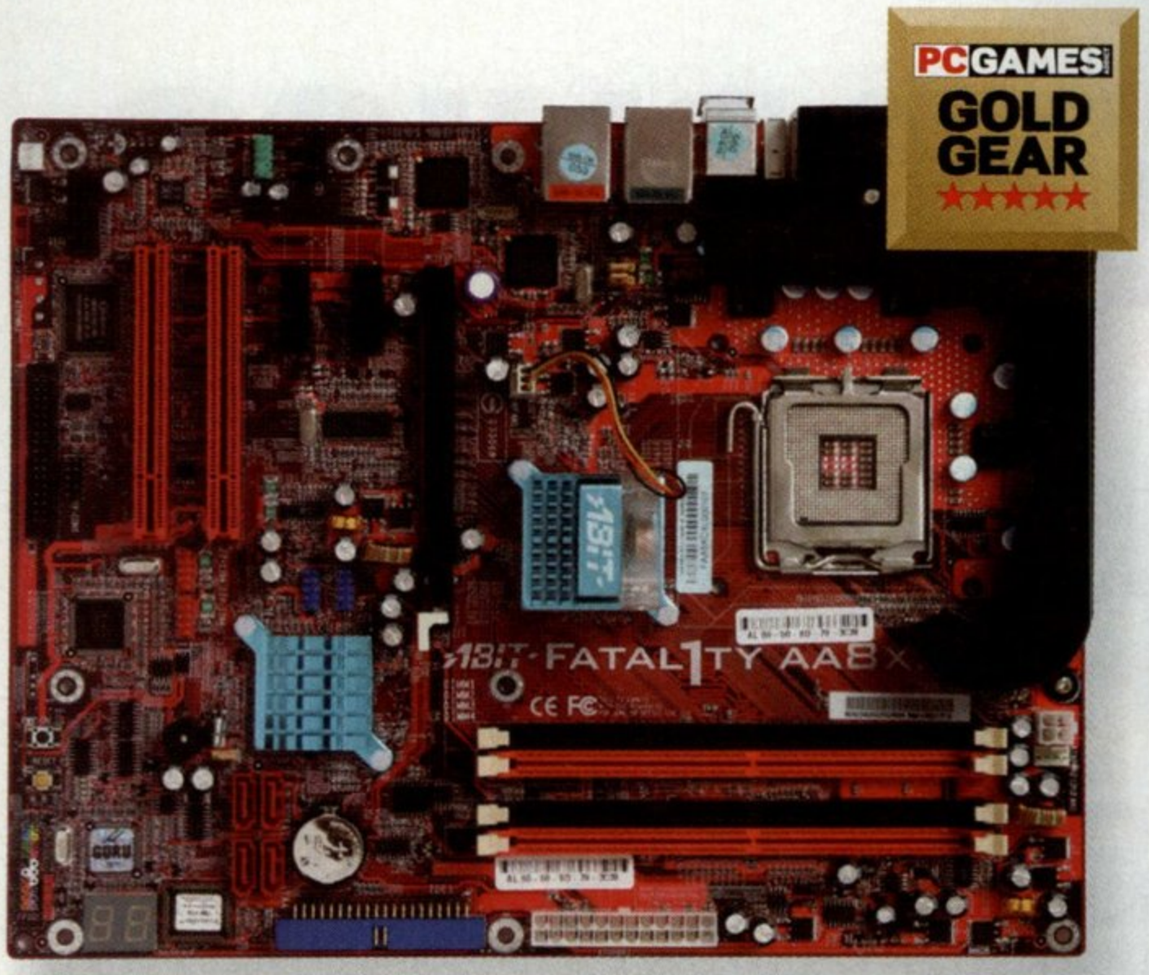
Other integrated features include the incredibly fast Intel Matrix RAID (112MB/sec transfers are not uncommon) and Intel's High Definition Audio, which will more than suffice for those without a sound card. Rounding out the feature-set is a Gigabit Ethernet port – an expected feature that's made its way on to most new motherboards.

LAN gamers will be disappointed to learn that the SB86i is around 40% heavier than previous Shuttle XPC units, primarily due to the large amounts of steel (as opposed to aluminium) used in construction. Still, it's certainly one of the more aesthetically pleasing SFF PCs we've looked at so far, which is a nice consolation, but doesn't really make the unit any more durable.

Other fancy touches include an optical drive bay that's concealed by a spring-loaded door, as well as plenty of air intakes (not to mention a huge exhaust fan) that'll help to keep temperatures down during summer.

Performance-wise, the SB86i compares favourably to a desktop system of similar specifications, so aside from the aforementioned weight issue it looks like Shuttle's got another winner on its hands.

PCGAMES ADDICT
PERFORMANCE 84%
VALUE 80%
›A well-rounded but heavy SFF PC
83%



Geared for gamers

ABIT FATAL1TY AA8XE

$420

Altech www.altech.com.au (02) 9735 5655

Riding on the coat tails of Jonathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel, arguably the most recognised and successful professional gamer in the world, Abit has released its latest motherboard directed solely towards the hardcore gamer (read: you). Yet regardless of Abit's questionable marketing tactics, the AA8XE is quite possibly the most impressive socket 775 Pentium 4 motherboard to pass through our labs to date.

The board is based on the Intel 925XE chipset, which means it boasts support for a blistering 1066MHz FSB (Front Side Bus) as well as DDR2 memory and PCI-X x16 graphics. It also sports two PCI-E x1 slots, two regular PCI slots, support for up to four SATA and two regular ATA drives, eight USB 2.0 ports, three IEEE1394A (Firewire) ports, both 10/100 and Gigabit Ethernet (dual ports) and 8-channel onboard audio through the Realtek ALC880D chip (supporting Dolby Digital Live). The sound quality produced by this onboard sound solution was surprisingly far better than we expected and will suffice for most DVD playback and gaming-related tasks.

An onboard wireless chip would've been a nice extra, but the board certainly isn't lacking in features by any stretch.

Abit has long recognised that gamers have an unquenchable desire to tweak their systems and thus, the AA8XE's BIOS includes a plethora of tweaking options, ensuring that you'll be able to squeeze every last ounce of juice from your components with ease.

Other Abit-exclusive features include an OTES cooling system mounted over the power transistors in order to avoid any overclocking bottlenecks, as well as red LEDs that backlight the entire motherboard giving it a healthy glow - particularly if your case includes a perspex window.

The i925XE chipset is easily the best performing Pentium 4 chipset currently available, so there's little for you to worry about in this regard. However, our comparisons to an nForce 4 system running an Athlon 64 4000+ showed that AMD still hold the crown when it comes to gaming performance, but not by more than 10-15% - unnoticeable in the real world.

Abit has always been known for the stability of its boards, and the Fatal1ty is no exception, lasting through hours of 3DMark looping without a single crash.

At $420 the Fatal1ty AA8XE is certainly one of the more expensive i925XE boards on the market, but if you plan to make full use of its extensive array of features and tweaking options the additional cost is well worth it.

PCGAMES ADDICT

PERFORMANCE 93%
VALUE 80%

›A killer basis for your gaming rig.

90%

Wasted potential

A4TECH BATTERY-FREE DESKTOP

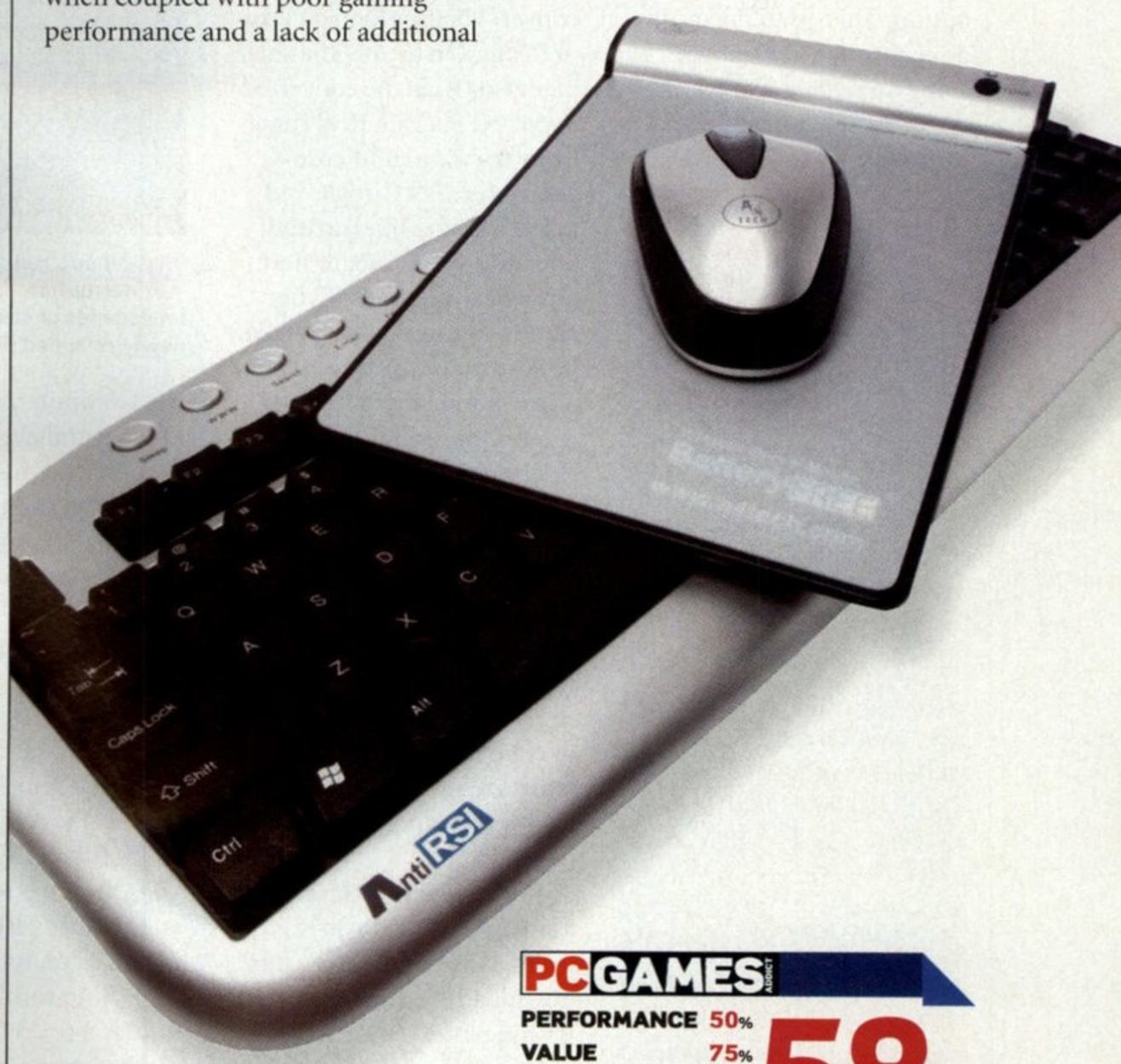
$59.95

Anyware www.anyware.com.au (02) 9879 5788

A4Tech is certainly no stranger to the PCGA hardware section, with its Battery-Free 3D wheel mouse gracing these pages just two issues ago. After the lashing we gave the 3D wheel mouse, when we saw that yet another A4Tech product was lined up for the test bench we hoped that at least some of the faults we mentioned previously were rectified. Alas, this wasn't the case. In fact, the Battery-Free desktop comes with the same 3D wheel mouse we've already reviewed, full of the same flaws. For those that haven't had the chance to read the review, we commended A4Tech for thinking innovatively and producing the first mouse based on RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technology, but were extremely critical of the fact that although the mouse itself is "wireless", it must be used on a tiny 16cm supplied mouse pad that's connected to the USB port. This clearly negates any wireless advantages and when coupled with poor gaming performance and a lack of additional buttons means that there's virtually nothing positive we can say about this mouse at all.

It's unfortunate then that the PS2 keyboard included with the package is so impressive, being extremely comfortable to use due to its ergonomic shape and well-spaced/sized keys. Furthermore, these keys have been positioned in an A-shaped layout, which does take some getting used to but is a thoughtful inclusion nonetheless as it serves to minimise the risk of RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury). It also boasts a number of convenient hotkeys (mainly for multimedia tasks) as well as headphone and microphone jacks on its left side - a very handy feature for gamers.

Priced at $59.95, the Battery-Free Desktop is also very affordable, however, considering how poor the mouse is, particularly for gamers, it's impossible for us to recommend this desktop in any capacity.



PCGAMES ADDICT

PERFORMANCE 50%
VALUE 75%

›Great keyboard, shocking mouse.

58%

BETTER GRAPHICS FOR FREE!

Enjoy a superior level of shiny things without spending a cent

BY ASHER MOSES & JON HICKS

DO IT... *THIS WEEKEND!*

Softmod your graphics card

PERFORMANCE

PROBLEM Your graphics card is slow and rubbish
REMEDY Check compatibility, cross fingers, attempt softmod
RESULT Top-end card for low-end money – with a bit of luck

Getting better graphics doesn't have to mean buying a new graphics card. For various reasons, card manufacturers produce a lot of chips that are based on the top-end spec but have the internal pipelines disabled. This dramatically reduces the card's performance, and it's sold as a low-power, low-cost option. This disabling is only done through software in some cases, so if you tweak the drivers, it'll transform into a top-end card.

ON THE DISC Keep your PC in peak condition with our hand-picked selection of apps and utilities > Toolkit

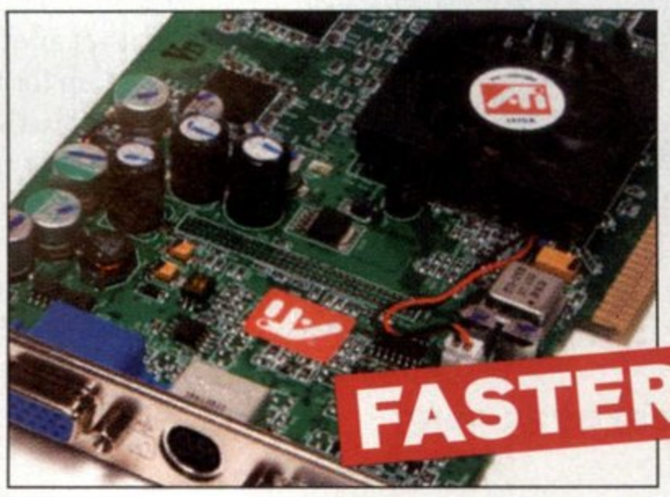
This is slightly risky – some chips are limited purely because they're defective, and unblocking them can cause problems. Straightforward driver tweaking isn't too troublesome though, as shown in the walkthrough here. If it all goes wrong you can just revert to the previous drivers. For this reason, it's well worth trying a simple driver tweak just to see what you can manage. I'm using a Radeon 9800SE as it's cheap and it's easy to boost it to a 9800 Pro, but you can also convert 9500s into 9500 Pros or 9700s. On the nVidia side, plain 6800s can be converted to 6800GTs using RivaTuner from **www.guru3d.com/rivatuner**. Try Google and hardware sites like **guru3d.com** and **hexus.net** to find out what's possible. If your card is softmoddable, you can be sure that someone else has already done it.

A more serious tactic is flashing your card's BIOS to a new version. This can unlock more substantial limitations and means you can use standard drivers, but is far riskier – it invalidates the warranty; you'll probably need to upgrade the cooling to cope with the new speeds, and it can even fry the card. It's very advanced stuff, so if in doubt, don't.

Try **www.mvktech.net** for a suitable BIOS if you're feeling adventurous. Start by downloading the BIOS and a flashing utility – for ATi cards, it's FlashROM and for nVidia it's nVFlash. Find a spare floppy disc, right-click My Computer, choose Format and check 'create MS-DOS startup disc'. Copy the new BIOS and the flash utility over, making sure that the new bios has a name in the 8.3 format so DOS can recognise it – rename it to something like newbios.rom if required. Then, cross your fingers and reboot the machine. Your PC should boot to the A:/ prompt.

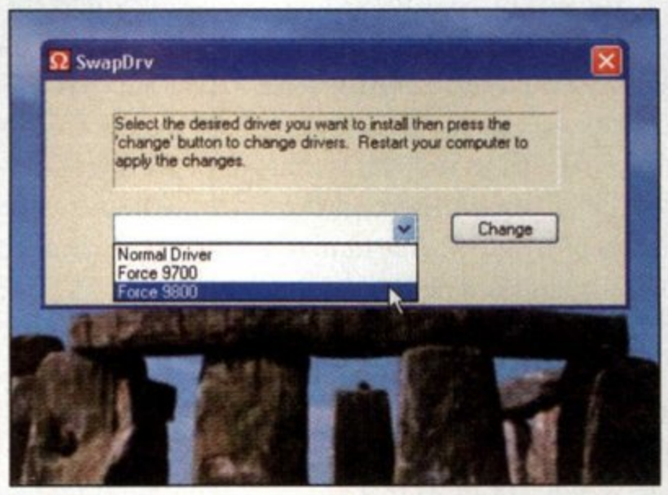
It's *absolutely vital* that your first step is to backup your existing BIOS. For an nVidia card, type 'nvflash.exe -b backup.rom' without quotes. For ATi, type 'flashrom.exe -s 0 backup.rom'. This will create a 'backup.rom' file that you can restore if it all goes horribly wrong, and you can move on to installing the new BIOS. For nVidia, type nvflash -p -u -f newbios.rom (or whatever the name of the file is). This will overwrite the old BIOS with the new one. For ATi, you want 'flashbios -p 0 newbios.rom'. If you're using a particularly unsuitable BIOS file then you may receive an incompatibility error – the safest option is to stop, but if you're really sure it will work, you can force it through by typing 'flashbios -f -p 0 newbios.rom'.

If the installation completes without any problems, you can reboot your system and test the results, as shown in step 4 above. If, however, you get any error messages while flashing *don't reboot the system* as the card may be corrupted and you won't be able to see anything on screen at all. You'll need to reinstall the backup BIOS by repeating the process with the name of your backup file - 'nvflash -p -u -f backup.rom' for example. If you do discover that everything's gone black when you restart, you'll need to scrounge a PCI graphics card – made by a different manufacturer than the damaged one – so you can get the display working and repeat the procedure with the backup BIOS.



1 An easy boost comes from a 9800SE with a 256Mb memory interface, which will have the black memory chips arranged in an L shape around the fan like this 9600 Pro.

2 Get the Omega drivers from www.omegadrivers.net. Uninstall your existing drivers using the ATI Driver Removal option in the Add/Remove Programs in the Control Panel, install the new ones.


SwapDrv
Select the desired driver you want to install then press the 'change' button to change drivers. Restart your computer to apply the changes.
Change
Normal Driver
Force 9700
Force 9800

3 Reboot, run 3DMark and look for graphical corruption. A few white dots are OK, but broken landscapes or chequerboard effects means that the newly-revealed pipeline just isn't up to the job.

4 Alternatively, download Rage3D from www.rage3d.com and adjust the z-mask properties. Results will vary, but there may be a combination that can remove the artefacts.

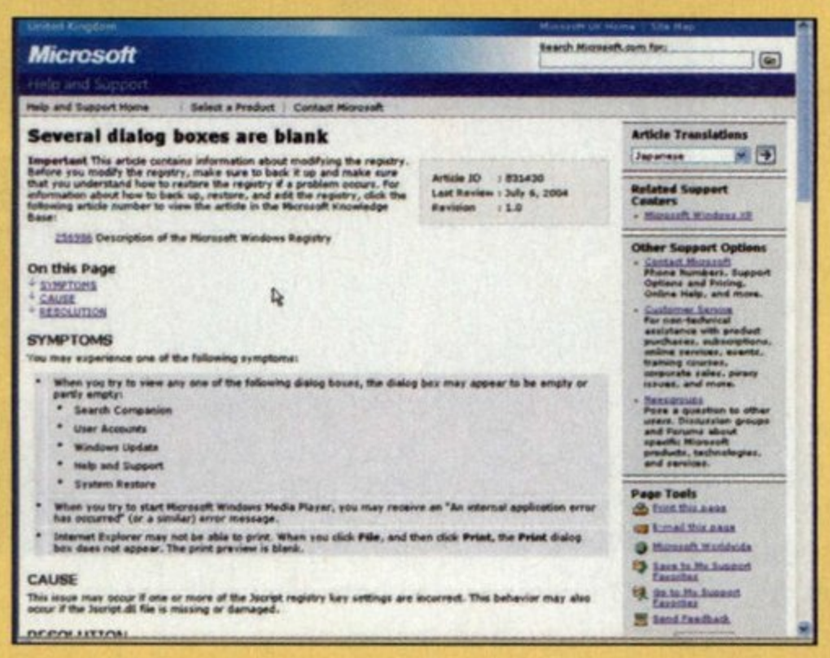
UTILITY OF THE MONTH

REGCLEANER

I must confess to still being of the scorched-earth school of PC maintenance, but there's no real need to format your hard drive every time something goes pear-shaped. This handy utility goes through your registry, startup options and add/remove programs listings, and enables you to quickly erase all trace of long-dead programs. Once cleaned, your PC should be less prone to crashes, slowdowns, and general clutter - and your files remain safe throughout. It's on the DVD or **www.worldstart.com/weekly-download/programs/regcleaner.exe**.

Best of the Tech Forum

POST SUBJECT
Random Windows Errors



There's nothing quite like totally random Windows errors to really spoil your day – and of course, they only appear when you've not backed up recently. Panic stations? Feel's natural, but try this instead:

1 The Situation Let's face it, regardless of how many people love or hate it, Windows isn't the most secure or stable operating system available, so it's unsurprising that it occasionally breaks down into a mass of random errors that will leave even the most hardened geek dazed and confused. However, these random errors are often not so random at all, and are frequently caused by a careless installation of system utilities. Confused? Allow us to give you an example.

2 The likely cause When installing an application such as Norton AntiVirus, it's essential that you remove all previous versions of the software using Symantec's AV Removal Tool, or you'll undoubtedly run into much headache in the future. Failing to do so can often mess with your JScript registry settings, resulting in copious random Windows errors such as websites that refuse to load, an inability to run Windows Media Player or play an MPEG, Windows Update agony, Hotmail errors (such as being unable to delete messages) and even website images that refuse to load.

3 Other suspects Although we used the Norton installation as an example, this could happen for a number of reasons and thus, if you're experiencing similar issues to those we described above, try following the steps below as you may need to re-register your Jscript.dll and Vbscript.dll registry keys..

4 The process Although we used the Norton installation as an example, this could happen for a number of reasons and thus, if you're experiencing similar issues to those we described above, try following the steps below as you may need to re-register your Jscript.dll and Vbscript.dll registry keys.

1 Click Start, and then click Run.
2 In the Open box, type regsvr32 jscript.dll, and click OK.
3 Click OK.
4 Click Start, and then click Run.
5 In the Open box, type regsvr32 vbscript.dll, and click OK.
6 Click OK.

While many would be quick to format when faced with such unexplainable errors, a process as simple as the above will usually do the trick - so be sure to keep this page bookmarked for future reference.

Furthermore, Microsoft provides more information on the issue at: http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;en-us;831430

DO IT... THIS MONTH!

CUSTOMISATION

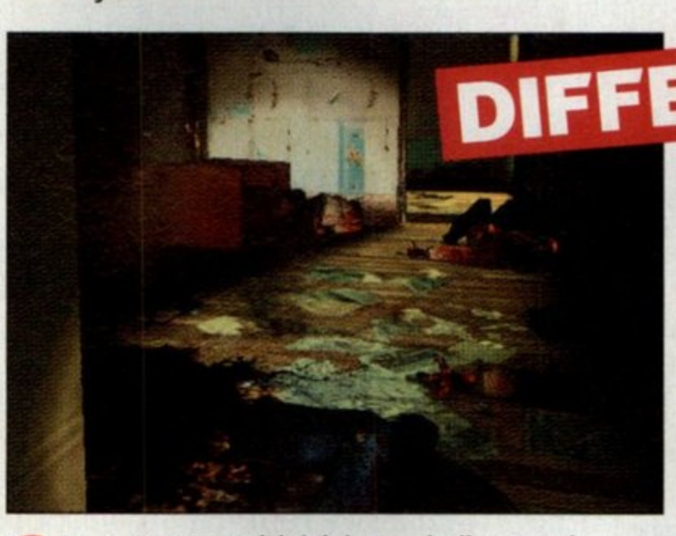
Change effects in HL 2

PROBLEM You want to customise *HL2*
REMEDY Use some of the command line options
RESULT You really are a free man

A few Steam updates mean you can now fix one of the biggest complaints: stuttering in-game audio. Right click the System Tray icon, choose Play Games, right-click Half-Life 2 and choose Properties > Launch Options. In the box that appears, type in '+snd_async_prefetch_priority 1' without the quotation marks. A few other treats are shown below. It's best to test them using the console, which you can enable by going to Options > Keyboard > Advanced and checking 'Enable developer mode (console)'. Hit the ` button under your Escape key to access it. Once you've got a favourite few tweaks, collect them into new text document called 'autoexec.cfg' in the Valve\Steam\SteamApps\[username]\half-life 2\hl2\cfg\ directory. They'll then be loaded whenever your play.

1 You can avoid graphical stuttering by using 'mat_forcemanagedtextureintohardware 1' but it can really hurt your framerate if you've got a weak system. Set it back to 0 to disable it.

2 For maximum realism, disable the crosshair, with 'crosshair 0' and enable footsteps with 'sv_footsteps 1'. To see how many frames a second you're getting, include the line 'cl_showfps 2'.



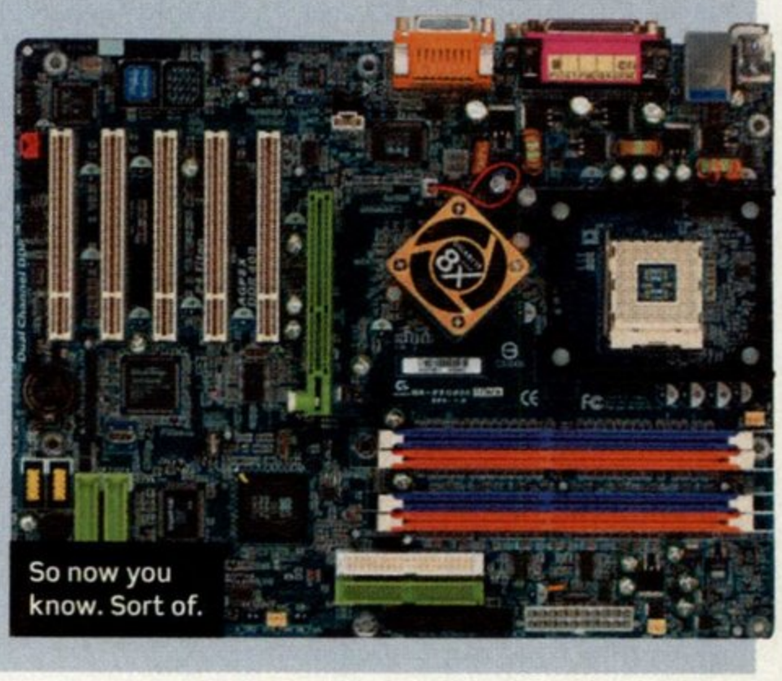
3 Increase gore with 'violence_hgibs 1' and 'violence_agibs 1' – this shows guts of humans and aliens respectively. 'violence_hblood 1' and 'violence_ablood 1' does the same for blood.

4 If your system is up to it you can record a demo, by opening the console and typing 'record [filename]'. Type 'stop' to halt recording and 'demoui' to open up a player to view the results.

TOO EMBARRASSED TO ASK...

"WHAT IS A... NORTHBRIDGE?"

All the stuff plugged into your motherboard isn't much good without a suitable brain to process it, so the chipset of your motherboard has always been important. Traditionally, it's divided in two: the Southbridge chip, which looks after most of the external connections and the PCI bus, and the Northbridge, which handles communications between the CPU, RAM and AGP slot. Because the Northbridge organises everything, it's the major factor in deciding what speed and size of RAM and CPU the motherboard will support – it also sets the frequency of the CPU.



So now you know. Sort of.

ON THE DISCS

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- **30** handy utilities
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- We pack every disc with the best new PC entertainment every month. If you can't find an item you were expecting, it probably just missed our deadline and you can bet we'll have it on next issue's disc.
- **PCs are inherently unreliable. Sad but true. So if something on your disc doesn't work then we'll help sort it out. See our Troubleshooter guide over the page to see what help we can offer.**
- We scour the earth to bring you the finest playable demos, movies, mods and utilities that PC gaming can provide. But if we miss a trick then tell our Disc Editor all about it. Email **dan@derwenthoward.com.au**

DVD vs CD

1 DVD **6.12 CDS!**

The world is moving on and CDs can't keep up. Demos, movies and mods are bigger than ever and, inevitably, we can't fit everything on the ancient storage medium.

This issue, DVD-drive owners get an extra:

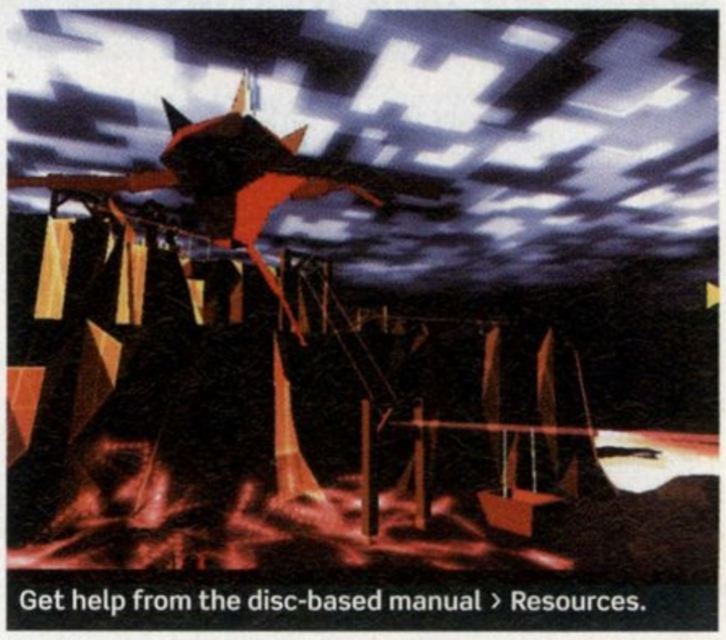
+ **9** playable demos
+ **7** movies
+ **23** mods & maps
+ **5** software tools
= **4.5GB of gaming glory!**

NO DVD DRIVE?

- New games these days are becoming huge, and DVDs are the only only practical way to store some of these games. You'll NEED one.
- **Get a DVD drive. There's one for only $70 or so at a hardware vendor near you.**

CD

DARWINIA


Get help from the disc-based manual › Resources.

WHAT IS IT?

The gorgeous and startlingly original strategy shooter from the great minds behind *Uplink*.

DEMO GOALS

Get the refinery back online by manning it with Darwinians, then put them to work in the mines.

PERFORMANCE TIPS

›Create units by holding down Alt and drawing gestures. Hold Alt and move the mouse to the left to see a list of the units you can create.

›Create a squad first, and use it to blast some virus scum – the controls are just like Cannon Fodder: left click to move, right click to fire, both buttons to toss a grenade.

›After clearing an area of the virus, create an Engineer and point him somewhere near the pink dots that enemies leave behind – he'll collect them and take them to the Incubator.

›Incubating souls creates Darwinians – the little guys you'll need to put in the Refinery and the Mines. You can't control them directly, though, so promote one of them to an Officer by clicking on a lucky Darwinian.

›If you can't work out how to get up to the Refinery, try the direct route – your Squads and Darwinians can actually scale steep surfaces –albeit quite slowly.

DEMO CHALLENGE
Harvest every soul of the enemies you kill before they ascend to the sky.

›The more Darwinians you have, the faster the doctor can improve your units. To tell him what to improve, hold Alt, move the mouse left and click on one of the units.

›We suggest setting him to work on the Officers so that you can get the 'Follow' flag – it makes leading the Darwinians around much easier.

README

Developer Introversion
Publisher Introversion **Requires** 600MHz CPU, 128Mb, 32Mb video card

CONTROLS **W, A, S, D** camera movement ■ **Right Mouse** fire (squad), direct Darwinians (officer) ■ **Q, E** camera up and down ■ **Left Mouse** select or move unit ■ **Both Buttons** grenade/airstrike ■ **Alt** task manager

DVD

ACT OF WAR

WHAT IS IT?

Real-time, counter-terrorism strategy, in the style of *Command & Conquer: Generals*. You control a rogue army unit attempting to take down a massive terrorist organisation, without the backing and support of the US Government.

DEMO GOALS

Establish a beachhead for your forces, then attack five SAM sites and a vital pass leading toward an oil refinery.

PERFORMANCE TIPS

›When the mission begins, use the F-15s to blast anything moving on the forward beach-area. You can queue up their attacks by clicking repeatedly on the icon in the main interface.

›Drones are best used to destroy stationary artillery and tanks. You can test this theory out by hammering the convoy that's been hemmed in to the north of your position. If a drone survives the assault, it'll return to base, ready to be used again. Make with the crushing.

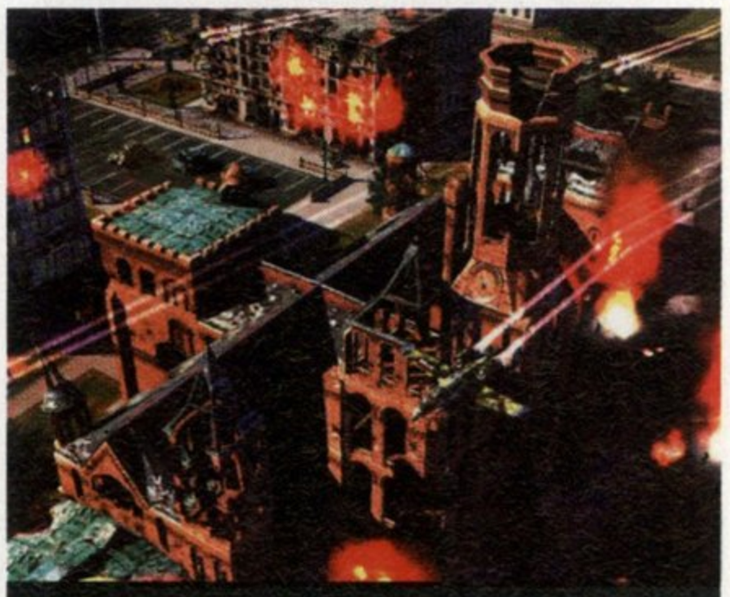
›Control provides you with a sniper squadron and a support helicopter. Take your trek slowly – using the buildings as cover. If you come under heavy assault use the drones for defence, then heal the soldiers with the chopper.

DEMO CHALLENGE
Complete the mission without resorting to the F-15 jet.

›Now comes the combined arms assault. Use your drones and F-15 fighters to skewer the nasty terrorists on the end of an air-to-ground missile. If the enemy attempt a retaliatory raid, use the F15s to intercept.

README

Developer Eugen Systems
Publisher Atari **Requires** 1.5GHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card


Destroy the cathedral. God's got plenty of them.

CONTROLS **Left Mouse Button** select ■ **Right Mouse Button** move/attack ■ **Mouse Wheel** zoom in/out ■ **Middle Mouse Button** rotate camera ■ **Ctrl + Left Mouse Button** select all units of this type

DVD

SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

DEMO CHALLENGE
Simple. Complete the level without being spotted. Did we say simple?

WHAT IS IT?
The third in the top-notch, techno thriller series. The whole point of Agent Fisher's job is to not be spotted, or it's game over.

DEMO GOALS
Sam's on a rescue and recon mission. Terrorists have nabbed a computer specialist with some dangerous knowledge, and you're sent in to rescue. They also have stolen weapons that you need to catalogue as you progress.

"Christ, this is no time to be doing Yoga, man. Get up!"

PERFORMANCE TIPS
› The rifle has two alternate fire-modes to choose from, switched between with the 'alt' key. The launcher selection enables you to fire secondary items such as the sticky camera for surveillance. The other mode, foregrip, gives you greater accuracy when shooting.
› Electronically Enhanced Vision is a new mode that shows up just what can be interacted with in the level. Press '1' to activate it.
› The handgun's alternate fire mode is the "Optically Channelled Potentiator". Aim it at a electronic device (a radio, say) and fire with the RMB and it switches it off for a few minutes. It's ace to confuse the guards with.
› Sam's got a knife as well. Swift, brutal justice is just a slash away, and it has other functions. You can puncture the fuel can on generators to switch them off, and use the knife to slash through tents and other soft barriers.

README
Developer Ubisoft
Publisher Ubisoft **Requires** 1.5GHz CPU, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card

CONTROLS **W, A, S, D** movement ■ **Space** select ■ **Shift** jump ■ **Mouse-wheel** speed up/slow down ■ **C** crouch ■ **F1** goals ■ **R** reload ■ **Left Mouse** fire ■ **Right Mouse** alternate fire

CD

OLD SKOOL SHOOT 'EM UPS

WHAT IS IT?
A collection of the best freeware and shareware 2D shoot 'em ups from across the world, demonstrating the astounding depth of this venerable gaming niche.

BUT MY PC WAS BUILT FOR MORE THAN THIS
Silence, whining heretic. Your PC was built to be played on, and the games assembled here demonstrate exactly what fun *is*. There's huge variety, from the all-out bonkers bomb-blasts of *Cho-68K*, to the single minded 'Deadeye', where you're asked to take your time and cue up every shot.

YOU'RE NOT CONVINCING ME
Sigh. There's more. What about *Bullet Philharmonic Symphony*, which spits screenfulls of glowing white orbs at your fragile ship, in time to mp3's placed in the music folder. Or try the utterly bizarre *Grid-Runner*, from herbalist llama-lover Jeff-Minter. It's a real twist on the keyboard/joypad control system. Instead, you direct your craft using the mouse, on a large open grid. Your bullets are always firing in a single direction – just keep moving. After that, there's the straight up vector boss-fights of *Warning Forever*. There's no let-up in the action, just a continue flow of ever-increasing, ever more ludicrous monster ships. By level 10, your tiny craft is dwarfed, its simple, tiny frame obscured by a hail of violent pink laser beams and twisting bullets. One down, infinity to go.

Then there's the ultra-mad, Giger inspired *Galshell*. It takes place inside some kind of organic tunnel (stay with us), with your (naked) avatar encased in a biotic shell. Killing the viri that spill towards you, releases some kind of bacterial power-up. Collect 100, to get a bonus score. Obviously.

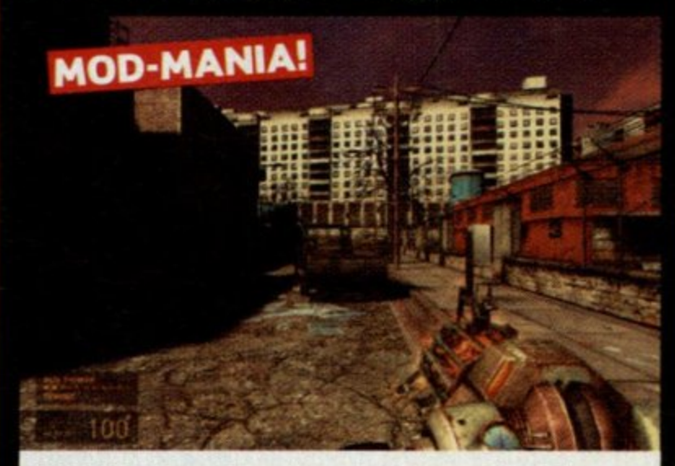
README
Developer Various
Publisher Various **Requires** Big PC, Joypad, itchy trigger fingers

Give your PC's hard drive a break by playing *Grid-Runner*.

DISC EXTRAS

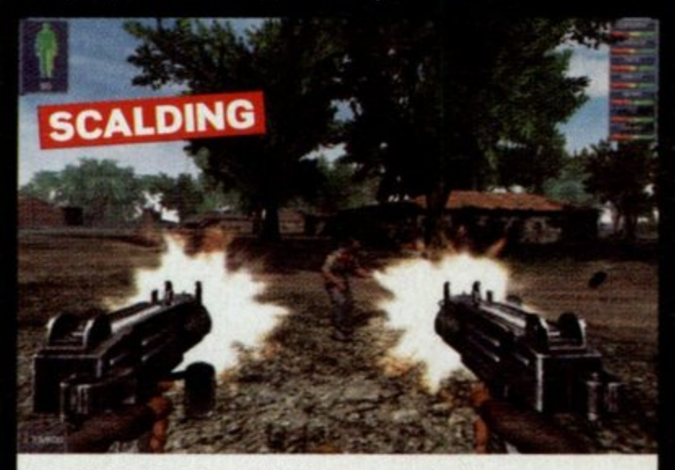
More than just demos...

+35 mods & maps
We offer another wave of *Half-Life 2* modding goodness! Plus other mods for: *Homeworld 2, Dungeon Siege, Rome: TW.*



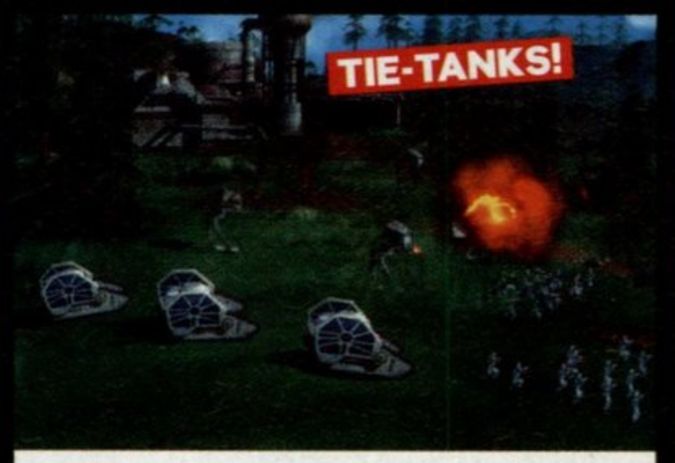
HALF-LIFE 2: 16 mods and extras on the CD!

+15 movies
The best from the machinima scene, including a *Dragonshard Talkthrough, Half-Life 2 Done Quick clips* and more!



BOILING POINT: Bubbling away nicely.

+7 Galleries
Screenshots of some of recent and upcoming releases: *Age of Empires 3, Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory, Empire at War*



EMPIRE AT WAR: A Strategy epic with Force!

+Patches
› The largest and latest fixes for you: *LoTR: Battle for Middle-Earth, Rome: Total War, Halo, Pirates & RCT.*

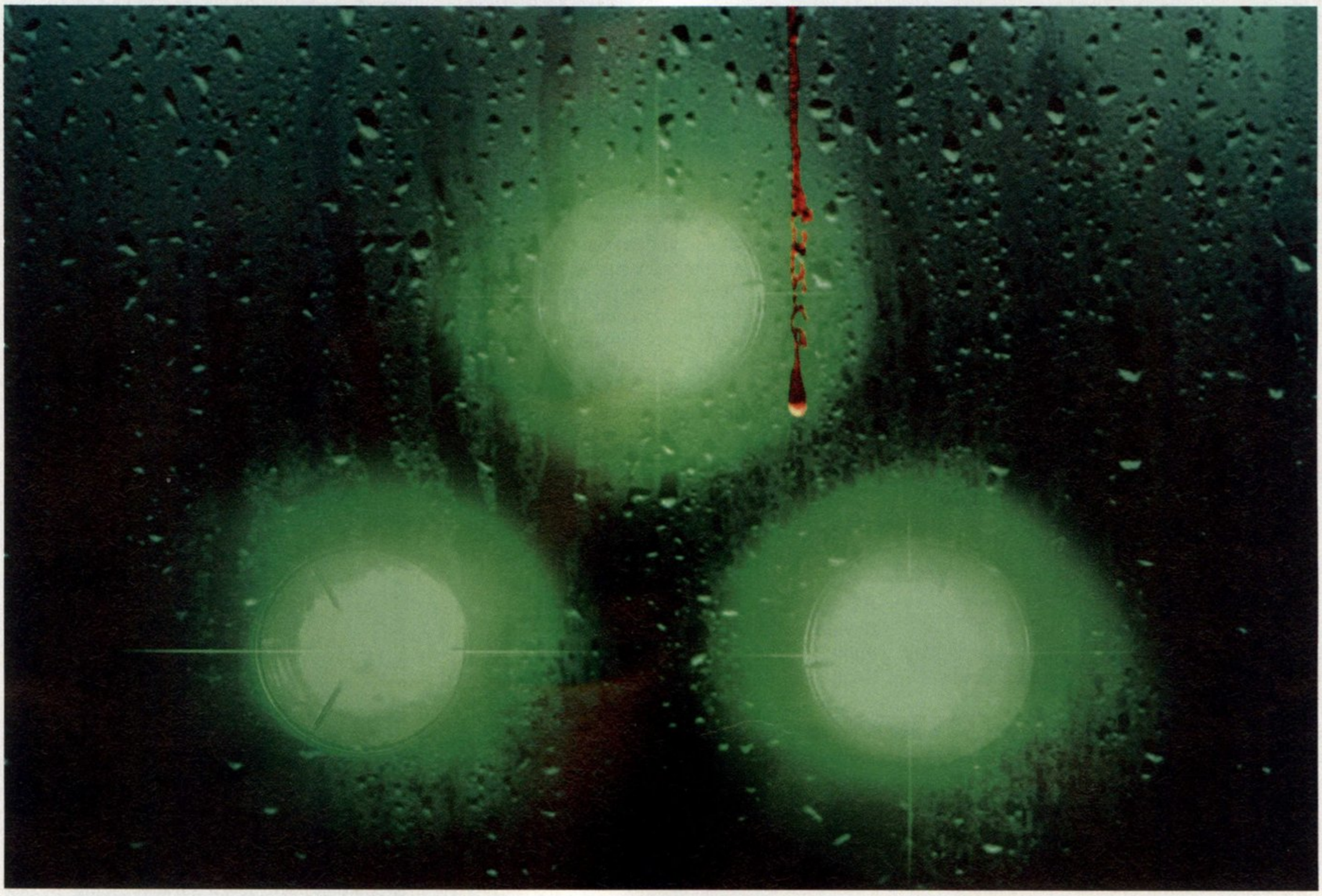
+Extra features
› OLD SCHOOL SHOOTERS - Seventeen freeware & shareware games, inc: Bugatron, Cho 68K, Dead Eye, Demon Star, Grid Runner, Intensity XS, Mutant Storm, Noiz 2A, Perfect Cherry Blossom, Platypus, Rrootage, Score Soldier, Space Birdz, Spheres of Chaos, Strayfire, Troid, Tumeki Fighters and the Warning Forever.

See the back of your box for full disc contents.

NEXT ISSUE OF PC GAMES ADDICT ON SALE APRIL 9

"WAS THAT YOU?"

CHAOS THEORY YOU'RE NOT ALONE IN THE DARK NOW!



All magazine contents and gifts subject to change. Some gifts not available overseas.

REVIEWS
Brothers in Arms
Project Snowblind
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

PREVIEWS
Age of Empires 3
Battlefield 2
Black & White 2
Pariah

DEMOS
Close Combat: First to Fight
Project Snowblind
Stolen

MORE!
Gaming peripheral group test
D-I-Y: Animate faces in Half-Life 2

PLAYBOY THE MANSION REVIEW!
A legitimate hit or shameless pixelated porn?

STOLEN STEALTH SHOWDOWN!
Can a woman make off with the stealth?

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